



### Commentary on Alireza Taheri's Book Review

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Dr. Taheri has provided a comprehensive positive review of Sergio Benvenuto's (2016) illuminating psychoanalytic study, *What Are Perversions? Sexuality, Ethics, Psychoanalysis*. Although I am in entire agreement with Taheri's positive assessment of Benvenuto's synthesis and transcendence of the contributions of Robert Stoller, Masud Khan and Jacques Lacan in this field, I would like to register a few points of contention for our consideration.

I have argued (Carveth 2013, 2018) that, far from being a "value-free" theory and practice, psychoanalysis is and always has been a value-infused, ethical enterprise from beginning to end. Despite Freud's own and his followers' attempts to disguise the fact, Benvenuto asserts that "Neurosis itself is an ethical illness" and "Analysis is above all an ethical cure that aims at caring for the other."

But the fact that analytic judgements are more ethical than we thought in no way calls into question what Benvenuto calls "the pernicious distinction" between facts and values. Despite recent fashionable attempts to deconstruct it, facts and values, as David Hume explained over two centuries ago, belong to different and incommensurate logical domains and one simply cannot deduce an *ought* from an *is*. But this point in no way detracts from Benvenuto's main claim, with which, like Thomas Szasz and others, I agree—namely that

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our judgements of illness and cure, health and pathology, are ethical judgements disguised as medical ones. When we call someone "mad" we really mean they are, if not *bad*, then at least difficult or disagreeable in some sense. For Benvenuto, what is perverse is behavior in which one uses another as a mere means, not an end—as an object not a subject of care and concern.

In this connection, in the course of developing his main argument, Benvenuto offers in passing a profound critique of Lacan, even while employing other aspects of his thought to good effect. He points out that, for Lacan, the other is at most an abstract structural position (as in the "Other"), never a subject for oneself. In this regard Benvenuto asks whether by not speaking of the object as a subject, is Lacan being perverse? Is Lacan's theory of perversion a perverse theory? Given the way Lacan disrespects, even brutalizes, his readers. This appears to me to be the case. How inadequate and stupid must Lacan have felt to have to work so hard to make his readers feel stupid and inadequate? Using others as targets of projective identification into whom to evacuate unbearable feelings is a characteristic of perversion.

Such is the widespread resistance to acknowledging the ethical nature of psychoanalysis that Benvenuto's ambivalence and contradictions in this area are understandable. In one place he openly admits that "analysts absolutely prescribe"—that is, indicate what they see as the goal of treatment: progress toward truth and *caritas*. Yet, even while acknowledging that successful analysis entails an ethical conversion, Benvenuto claims "analysts are amoral, apathetic ... they cure not because they desire to cure but because they desire to analyze ... they are spontaneously ethical."

No, this is disingenuous. Here Benvenuto succumbs to his fear of departing too far and too clearly from Freud's own defensive denial. For if we analysts cure at all, it is because we desire to cure and so desire because we are neither amoral nor apathetic, but committed to *caritas*. Even if we don't recognize it, or need to pretend we don't, our analysands—at least those who get cured—certainly do. Benvenuto admits as much himself when he suggests analysts seek to reinforce their own attainment of *caritas* by helping analysands achieve it.

I have always felt that psychoanalysis suffers from a tendency to treat what is dimensional as categorical, speaking as if one either is or is not a psychopath, for example. As the Canadian psychologist who pioneered the psychopathy checklist, Robert D. Hare mentioned, psychopathy is a dimension of human personality, ranging from mild to medium to high. But at times Benvenuto writes as if one either is or is not a pervert, when the truth is that just as we are all psychotic and psychopathic to a degree, so we are all perverse to some degree—though, sadly, some are unable to access this dimension sufficiently to enjoy a vivid sex life. People suffering from mild to moderate degrees of perversion are able to both use their accomplices as objects and then later, if not almost simultaneously, as subjects of gratitude, care and concern.

Benvenuto reminds us that behavior that is quite legal may nevertheless be perverse in its indifference to the other as a subject. By the same token, behavior that may be illegal might nevertheless not qualify as perverse. By Benvenuto's standard: "the non-perverse sexual act is one wherein one has *caritas* towards the other." His distinction between legal/moral norms on the one hand, and ethical norms on the other, parallels my distinction between the superego, embodying the former, and the conscience, grounded in attachment and love. From this perspective, while prostitution and promiscuity may be legal they may nonetheless be deemed unethical and perverse.

In order not to misunderstand Benvenuto's and my own insistence on the ethical (not moral) nature of psychoanalysis this distinction between the superego and the conscience is critical. While it is true we must not be superego-ish with patients, it is equally true we must carry the conscience in the treatment until such time as our analysands are able to assume this responsibility themselves.

What then, finally, is perversion? Returning to the centrality of the Oedipus in a psychoanalysis that has displaced it in favor of the so-called "pre-oedipal"—when for Melanie Klein at least this scarcely exists--Benvenuto views perversion as a kind of creative (however destructive) construction, a kind of masterpiece, aimed at transforming

childhood pain into pleasure. And what kind of pain, to be precise? Oedipal pain, otherwise known as jealousy, the jealousy inevitably and universally arising when a child, boy or girl, recognizes that the primary caregiver desires another, a third. Benvenuto points out that Klein was naive to think such jealousy is grounded in fear of loss: Othello would hardly be relieved to learn that Desdemona has no intention of leaving him but merely wants to sleep with Cassius from time to time.

The matter is grounded in narcissism, the desire to be the center of the other's desire. You thought that she or he had eyes only for you, but she/he was, in fact, looking over your shoulder at another. Who that third may be varies widely; in the Trobriand Islands it is not the one who sleeps with mother but her brother who, nevertheless, is the real rival in that he is the most important person in her life. In the same way, Lacan implicitly desexualizes the Oedipus, recognizing it as primarily a narcissistic project rather than a primarily sexual one. Because we are mammals and primates we instinctually attach to primary caregivers, and as human subjects inevitably suffer jealousy when our desire to monopolize the desire of this other is thwarted.

The pervert seeks to escape the need to accept and mourn this loss by erotizing and/or inflicting it on another. Benvenuto provides rich descriptions of how all this plays out in the different varieties of perversion.

### *References*

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