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Activity versus passivity: beyond the question of gender.

It is well-known that Freud's first steps in the field of hysteria brought him the discovery of traumatism and the seduction by the father. Right from the start, the question of gender and the relationship between man and woman is also one of his main worries, with a special accent on femininity. During the development of his work, he will produce several answers, but they will never be very satisfying. Different as they may be, there is one constancy in it. Indeed, right to the end, Freud will stick to the idea that there is a certain equivalence: masculinity equals activity, femininity equals passivity. E.g. the libido for him is active-masculine, meaning: phallic. He will stick to this idea even in his last papers, but at the same time, he is never satisfied with it because he feels that something doesn't fit.

My thesis can be summarised in three points:

- the primary opposition is the one between activity and passivity;
- the opposition between man and woman is only one possible implementation of this primary opposition, the main one being the opposition between the subject and its own body;
- it is this primary opposition that grounds the statement "there is no sexual relationship".

In order to demonstrate my thesis, I will start with Freud's theory and continue with Lacan's elaboration that Lacan gave to it.

Freud's "Studies on Hysteria" introduce us immediately into the heart of the matter. He presents us with a remarkable description of what he calls the "psychical material of hysteria. Based on his clinical experience, he concludes that this material is arranged around what he considers "the nucleus in which the traumatic factor had culminated or the pathogenic idea has founded its purest manifestation" (SEII, 288). The aim of his hypnocathartic technique is to bring this nucleus back into consciousness and "abreact" it, but time and again, this fails. Freud has to conclude that the essential characteristic of this nucleus is precisely the fact that it can never be put into words, because the defence is such that the words for it are lacking forever (GW 1, 291-294). He assumes that the basic aetiology of hysteria goes back to a primary experience of anxiety that arises in the confrontation with something for which the psyche does not have an appropriate answer and leaves us with a lack in this respect. Quote: "This first stage of hysteria may be described as "fright hysteria"; its primary symptom is the manifestation of fright accompanied by a gap in the psyche" (Manuscript K, SEI, p.228).

So, right from the start, we can already come to a kind of conclusion. This traumatic, fright-inducing nucleus that cannot be put into words, exists outside the Symbolic and must necessarily belong to the Real. As a consequence, it can only be approached by sideways, by its borders, meaning the formations of the Unconscious, and that is precisely what Freud has done.

At the end of 1895, he sends a manuscript to Fliess in which we find a very good summary of his ideas at that time. Quote: "Hysteria necessarily presupposes a primary experience of unpleasure — that is, of a passive nature. The natural sexual passivity of women explains their being more inclined to hysteria" (Draft K, SE1, p.228). We need to deconstruct this quote.

Firstly, we have hysteria and passivity. This idea is essential: the primal experience leading to hysteria is a passive one against which defence is only possible in a further development. Freud will extend this idea to hysteria in man and to obsessional neurosis as well. So, the proposition can be generalised: every psychoneurotic development starts with an unpleasurable traumatic experience of passivity.

Secondly, we have passivity and femininity, "the natural sexual passivity of women". Freud is aware of the fact that something is wrong with this idea, and he will try to reformulate it several times during the later development of his work, but he will never find a satisfactory answer. Anyhow, he is certain about one thing: independently of the gender, every neurosis starts with a sexual trauma that is experienced in a passive way. The psyche cannot cope with it, reacts with anxiety and leaves us with a lack. From a lacanian point of view, this trauma can be understood as the lack of the Other, that is, that part of the Real that is excluded from the Symbolic.

Of course, this idea of the Other is something that we add, but it can be argued from Freud's theory as well. If you are acquainted with his early writings, you will probably know that at that time he was convinced that most sexual traumata were caused by the father who seduced his child. Later on, he had to revoke this idea, but it is a mistake to think that it disappeared altogether from his work. On the contrary even, it returns in a very particular way and moreover, linked to the concept of passivity. In his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality", Freud already mentions two forms of *jouissance* and these two forms can be interpreted with the activity-passivity polarity. The passive form refers to what the child has to undergo from the mother. Initially, every child is reduced to the passive object of the *jouissance* of the mother, she is the active party of the two. The child itself wants to leave this passive position and exchange it for the active one, meaning the phallic position. Freud discovers this transition from passive to active firstly in the oral field, from being suckled to active sucking (GW V, p.82-84), but later on, he will recognise this transition in every drive. As a result, he will consider this transition as one of the basic vicissitudes of the drive as such, meaning that there is always an active and a passive version to it (SE 14, p.126). Lacan will retake this idea even more generally by recognizing two versions of each partial drive: to see and to make oneself seen, to hear, and to make oneself heard, to eat and to make oneself gobbled up etc. (sem.XI, Les quatre concepts, p.177 ff.; English version, The four fundamental etc., p.195 ff).

Twenty years later, when Freud is trying to elaborate the feminine version of the oedipal complex, he returns to his original seduction theory, albeit with an important correction. Indeed, the study of the female Oedipus complex demonstrates that it is the mother, and not the father, who seduces the child, and this simply because of her way of handling the child's body during the mothering. The pampering process reduces the child to her object of *jouissance*, and it is first of all the mother who enjoys this process (GW. XIV, 351 en GW XV, 128-29). Considered in this way, the child functions as a plug, it fills the lack of the Other and provides this Other with *jouissance*. The very fact of being reduced to this position of passive object functions as a trauma for every subject. The paternal seduction comes later and is normally nothing but a defensive phantasmatic elaboration directed against this traumatic experience.

Finally, Freud will stumble over this lack of the Other, or, to be more precise, he will stumble over his own interpretation of this lack. Indeed, for Freud, every lack has to be interpreted in terms of castration, with its two different expressions depending on the gender. For a masculine subject, it is castration anxiety as such, for a female subject, it is the penis envy. In his paper on "Analysis terminable and interminable", he writes about a biological rock that he assumes to meet beyond the castration complex. For him, this rock puts an end to all the therapeutical hope concerning the castration complex. As this means the impossible end of analysis, the reader usually stops his lecture of this paper at that point, but it is worthwhile to continue one's reading (GW XVI, 96-99). As a matter of fact, Freud discusses the idea of a general principle that finds a different expression depending on the gender in which it appears. To be sure, this principle concerns castration, but right from the start, Freud remarks that it expresses something else as well, I quote: "(...)from the start, repudiation of femininity would have been the correct description of this remarkable feature in the psychical life of human beings." (SE23, p.250). And in the very last paragraph of the paper, we read: "The repudiation of femininity can be nothing else than a biological fact, a part of the great riddle of sex." (SE 23, 252). Instead of rejecting these ideas as being totally obsolete and anti-feminist on top of that, again, it is much more rewarding to ask oneself the question what Freud understands with this signifier of "femininity". If one studies the last pages of his paper, the answer is quite clear: femininity equals passivity, especially passivity towards an Other.

If one thinks this through, then this theory is not very surprising. The idea that a child has to liberate itself from the original symbiosis with his mother, that it has to fight for its autonomy, these ideas are already

present in what I consider to be the Anglo-Saxon psychoanalytical psychology. The lacanian theory, at least in my interpretation, provides us with a different answer that will permit us to go beyond this "two bodies-psychology".

This part of the lacanian theory is to be found in what I consider to be the second Lacan, the one of the Real and the Jouisissance. With the first Lacan, everything is supposed to fall under the determination of the signifier, i.e. the Symbolic Order. This overdetermination enables us to make predictions (cfr the seminar on the Purloined Letter) and to practice analysis. Most of you are probably familiar with the keywords from that period: "parole vide, parole pleine, la réalisation symbolique" (full speech, empty speech, the symbolic realisation) etc. Well, in the first chapter of seminar eleven, Lacan introduces his audience to the idea of causality as something that lies outside this determinism. Ultimately, this cause is to be considered as undetermined, not subjected to and even in opposition with the deterministic laws of the symbolic order. In the further lessons of seminar eleven, this in — determination will be interpreted as the traumatic Real, that is to say, that part of the drive that resists to the process of symbolisation and that operates in a traumatic way for the subject. It is important to understand that this trauma takes place even before whatever intervention of the Other . Much later, in his last seminars, Lacan will talk about the identification with the real part of the symptom and this will enable him to open a new theory on the (in-)terminability of an analysis — this is his theory on the "sinthomme".

So, from seminar XI onwards, the body takes a completely different place. Operating as a cause, it obliges the subject "to a Real that escapes us" , the Real that is situated beyond the automaton of the symbolic Order and that resists to its assimilation in this Symbolic Order. Considered from this point of view, the idea of causality implies the idea of a failure, of something that did not succeed, thereby leaving the place open for something else. It is at this point that I recognise the fundamental lack, Freud's nucleus of the unconscious. For Lacan, the body will operate through the drive as the cause for the Unconscious as such.

It is important to understand that this new theory on causality is not introduced in an isolated way, on the contrary even. This new theory enables Lacan to provide the Unconscious with a new status, and this status is grounded on what happens on the level of the subject and its body. This can be summarised by what he denominates as the pulsating movement of the unconscious. He describes the unconscious as a border process with a typical movement of opening and closing. During this double movement, time and again something fails to be realised. That is the reason why Lacan considers both the subject and the unconscious to be pre-ontological. Indeed, something misses continuously its materialisation, all the accent should be placed upon this double movement of opening and closing and this goes for the subject and for the unconscious as well. This has a very important consequence: the aim of the treatment can not be considered any more in terms of "symbolic realisation", because that is precisely impossible from a structural point of view. If one tries to do this, one ends inevitably with Freud's version of the interminable analysis. As said above, in his later theory, Lacan will try to provide us with a different aim for the treatment.

So, with this new theory on causality, it is the Real that operates in a causal way and the determinism of the Symbolic is not absolute anymore. The question is: what Real are we talking about? Or, to be more specific: which lack are we talking about, because the Real always implies a lack in the Symbolic. In Lacan's preceding theory, the accent was on desire and the lack of the Other to which the subject tried to produce an answer. Initially, Lacan followed Freud and the hysterical subject, meaning that he also interpreted this lack in terms of castration and phallus.

His new theory starts when he introduces the Real of the body as the basic causality. We have to be even more specific: it is not so much the body he is referring to, no, he is talking about the organism and the organs. Indeed, in his lesson of the 27th of May 1964, Lacan surprises his audience by introducing them to another lack, another loss. This lack precedes the well-known lack in the chain of signifiers, the one that determines the desire of the subject in the dialectical exchange between mother and child. The least that can be said about this new lack is that it is indeed a very fundamental one, because it concerns the loss of the eternal life. Paradoxically enough, this lack is installed at the very moment of the conception, that is, at the moment of the birth of a sexually differentiated life form. In order to explain this unexplainable fact,

Lacan provides his audience with a myth, that is, he tells them a story about something that flies away at the moment of birth, a kind of lamella. This thing lost forever is object (a) in its purest form as life instinct. For Lacan, the loss of eternal life goes back to a biological fact, and in this way, he will reconsider Freud's biological rock. In opposition to Freud, he will interpret this biological fact not so much as a stumbling rock, but as something that permits the subject to escape from the all embracing determinism (of the Symbolic).

Lacan's explanation of the lamella myth runs as follows. Organisms that reproduce themselves in a non-sexual way — bacteria's, viruses, prions, and today clones as well — can in principle live forever, because their reproduction comes down to a replication. In these cases, death is purely accidental and not inevitable as such. This is not the case with sexually differentiated organisms, because these life forms have to die. The cell division that characterises these sexual life forms — the meiosis — causes not only the loss of half of the genetic material, it excludes these life forms from the eternal life as well. Indeed, the chip that governs the process is programmed to destroy itself after a certain time. In contemporary biology, this is coined as the apoptosis. It is interesting to note the analogies with Freud's commentary on the Weissman's theory in "Beyond the pleasure principle".

The non-sexual life form contains the possibility of eternal life. Sexual reproduction, on the other hand, implies automatically the death of the individual. The story does not end there, on the contrary. In one way or another, each organism tries to escape from this loss, and yearns to return to the situation from before the sexual differentiation. Freud had already recognised this tendency to return to a previous state of being as a basic characteristic of the drive. By the way, in this respect, we are still talking about the drive, meaning before any social determination of gender and before any division in partial drives. We will return to this with Freud's idea of life and death drive, albeit that we will have to reinterpret his denominations.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the reaction to this primordial loss — that is, the defensive elaboration and the attempt to return to the previous state — that this reaction takes place on the symbolico-imaginary scene, meaning the scene where the gender identity will be acquired. Because of the specifics of the oedipal structure, this gender identity comes down to a phallic one. This means that the attempt to return — that is, the answer to the primordial lack, the lack in the Real — will be produced on the level of the second lack, the lack in the Symbolic. Hence the fact that this fundamental lack on the level of the organism is reinterpreted as a phallic lack in the relation between subject and Other — this is first of all the case in hysteria and in neurosis in general, which explains Freud's obstinate clinging to this phallic interpretation.

During this reinterpretation, object (a) becomes associated to the borders of the body, the orifices through which the secondary losses take place: mouth, anus, eye, ear and genitals. This phallic interpretation of the object (a) also implies the fact that the lack and original loss are introduced into the relation between child and first Other, the mother, and from there onwards, in the relationship between man and woman. The Freudian Oedipal complex can very well be summarised like that. From that moment onwards, the drive is turned into partial drives and presents always a fusion between life and death drive.

Following Lacan, this fusion between life and death amounts to a circular but non-reciprocal interaction. The loss at the level of the Real transforms individual life into one elongated attempt to return to the preceding eternal life. From a structural point of view, this leaves us with two elements, of whom one operates as a force of attraction, whilst the other wants to return and to move forward at the same time. This is the *Philia* and *Neikos* to which Freud refers (GW XVI, 92). Their interaction is each time staged on a different level, which installs and endorses the fact that there is no relationship between them — the two borders can never meet. As early as 1948, Lacan had already written that in mankind, there is a "déhiscence", a cleft in the very core of the organism, a primordial discordance (Ecrits, 96). The final result of this primordial cleft is the fact there is no sexual relationship.

The last scene of the interaction concerns the advent of the subject, the opening and closing movement takes place through the processes of separation and alienation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the scope of this interaction goes way further. I will present you with an overview of this range.

Firstly, we have the already mentioned advent of the living at the moment of birth. The advent of sexually differentiated lifeforms implies the loss of the eternal life. This loss is summarised by Lacan in his concept of the object (a), meaning the pure loss of the lifeinstinct. This eternal life, the Zoë of the classical Greek, functions as a force of attraction for the individual life, the Bios, that tries to return. The price to pay for this return is the loss of this individual life as such, and this explains the other tendency, the one that flees from it in the opposite direction. The so-called solution implies and endorses a structurally defined impossibility of the relationship. Indeed, the bios tries to join the zoë through sexual reproduction, thus entailing a necessary failure and even repeating and endorsing the original loss. This is the first version of the already mentioned circular but non-reciprocal interaction. From this moment onwards, life and death drive are fused. From the above, it is clear that the idea of life and death has to be applied in a balanced way. The death of the individual implies eternal life, the loss of eternal life implies a limited individual life — life and death have a different meaning, depending on the point of view that is taken. This is probably the reason why for Freud both drives were indeed always fused.

Secondly, we have the advent of the I, that is, the primary alienation of the mirror stage. The living being acquires a first mastery, a first identity because of the unified image of his body through the master signifier, the "I". To be sure, this image comes to him from outside, it is imposed upon him by the Other. This "I" will never cease to try to join its body, that is, the being of its body, but then again, the price to pay for this joining is the disappearance of this "I" — hence the tendency to flee in the other direction as well. Finally, this solution will provide the "I" only with the body of the Other, thus endorsing the loss of its being.

Thirdly, we have the advent of the subject. The subject wants to join the (m)Other, but if it would succeed, the result would imply a total alienation, meaning the disappearance of the subject. Hence the other tendency for separation. Again, this solution implies a structurally impossible relationship, because the attempt of the subject to join the Other, must necessarily pass through the signifier, thus repeating and endorsing the original division of this subject.

Thus considered, the subject enters the scene as the last implementation of this structure and contains all the previous ones as well. Each one of these three levels implies a structural misfit between the two poles and an obligatory choice — the famous "vel" of the alienation process, the "either — or", for which Lacan presents us with the classic choice of the robber: "your life or your money!". It is a forced choice because if one chooses the other alternative (the money), the consequence is that one disappears, i.e. you lose your life. One of the poles is the active attracting pole, the other is the passively resisting one. These ideas of passivity and activity should not be interpreted in terms of hyperactivity versus immobility. Indeed, sometimes a lot of activity is necessary if one wants to reach a passive position, and the active pole may very well wait passively for the other party to join him — Freud himself said already that the death drive operates in total silence. The opposition between activity and passivity amounts to a structural inequality between a forever lost totality on the one hand and its product on the other hand, in which the lost totality tries to recapture, to regain its product, thereby reducing it to a passive object of its jouissance.

This serial of advents demonstrates that the original cleft between the psyche and the Real of the organism will be repeated in the cleft between the subject and its symbolico-imaginary body, meaning his gender identity body.

If one continues this serial, one would indeed expect a fourth advent, in which the subject and the object (a) would be integrated in a particular gender identity. This is what the Oedipus complex does, in its own particular way, that is: by interpreting the original loss in terms of castration. The result is that the oedipal structure inaugurates a gender differentiation which is not a genuine one, because it is solely based on the presence of absence of the phallus. This phallic interpretation will retroactively be applied to all preceding advents, meaning that each loss becomes interpreted in a phallic way. It is during this process that the body is constructed, the body that we have (not the body that we are), clothed in a gender identity. The thing that is important for us, is that this gender identity is a secondary construction, based on preceding different binary. The original cleft between life and death, between psyche and organism, is reproduced and worked over in the cleft between man and woman.

Thus considered, the cleft between body and Other, between being and sense, is reproduced in the cleft between woman and man. Moreover, this repetition produces the same effect: whatever the efforts of the subject to join his body by way of the Other of language, he will never succeed, because the cleft is precisely due to this Other of language. Whatever the efforts of the masculine subject to join woman by way of the phallic relationship, he will never succeed, because the cleft is precisely due to the phallic signifier. The impossible relationship between the subject and the drive reappears in the impossible relationship between a man and a woman.

Beyond this homologous structure that never stops to be never written in order to attain an ever-impossible return, we meet with the beyond of the Freudian pleasure principle. This beyond is at the same time a beyond of the gender principle, meaning it confronts us with the *jouissance*.

Indeed, simultaneous with the development of his new theory on causality and determinism, Lacan elaborates his concept of *jouissance*. Of course, the idea as such is older, but it will receive a whole new meaning. To be more specific: from seminar XI onwards, Lacan will assign the *jouissance* to the body, that is, to the body as an organism. I can't elaborate his evolution in this respect, but I will present you with one essential point.

In my reading, the dichotomy between the phallic *jouissance* and the *jouissance* of the body does not cover the binary between male and female. One could have had this impression from a certain reading of the "Encore" seminar, in particular the chapter on the "other *jouissance*"). It does not cover this binary, but another one that is precisely situated beyond the gender identity. By way of conclusion, I'd like to give you an idea of this binary.

Already in his paper on "Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir", Lacan stated that the phallic *jouissance* operates as a defensive device on this other *jouissance*, I quote: "Le plaisir marque la fin de la *jouissance*" (Pleasure marks the end of *jouissance*). Later on, he will say that this phallic *jouissance* operates as an obstacle: "Phallic *jouissance* is the obstacle owing to which man does not come to enjoy woman's body, precisely because what he enjoys is the *jouissance* of the organ" (Lacan, On Feminine Sexuality, p.7) ("la *jouissance* phallique est l'obstacle par quoi l'homme n'arrive pas à jouir du corps de la femme, précisément parce que ce don't il jouit, c'est de la *jouissance* de l'organe", Sém. XX, 13). This aspect of lacanian theory suggested to a number of postlacanians that one should try to bypass this phallic obstacle in order to reach this dreamt-of other *jouissance*. Well, insofar that this is possible, one will not meet with a relationship that would be more sexual than the previous one, on the contrary.

In this region beyond the phallic, we do not meet with the searched-for and dreamt-of sexual relationship between the man and the woman. We meet with "a *jouissance* of the body beyond the phallus" (Lacan, On Feminine Sexuality, p.74; "une *jouissance* du corps au-delà du phallus, sém.XX, 69). In my interpretation, this means that the relationship between man and woman beyond the phallus is the very same one as the relationship between the subject and the Real of its body. This allows me to rephrase the already quoted lacanian statement as follows: "Phallic *jouissance* is the obstacle owing to which the subject does not come to enjoy his own body as real, precisely because what he enjoys is the *jouissance* of the phallus".

Well, whenever this other *jouissance* of the body will pop up, the subject will always react in the same way, that is, with anxiety. Indeed, this *jouissance* of the body is situated beyond the Symbolic, meaning that it implies necessarily the disappearance, the death of the subject. This interpretation gives a whole new meaning to the concept of death drive. Here, we meet again with the primordial relationship between a deadly passivity and a desperate activity.

This brings me to the clinical applications. What are the clinical manifestations of this *jouissance* coming from the beyond? We know at least two of them: the Freudian clinic of the traumatic neurosis and the lacanian clinic of the psychosis. In case of psychosis, the subject is confronted directly to an Other without the protection of the Symbolic. Here, we meet with the Other who enjoys the subject in a terrifying way, hence the classic idea of the psychotic to be persecuted. In case of traumatic neurosis, the subject is

always in one way or another confronted with a Real that mortifies him, that leaves him without any answer . In this case, the necessary signifiers are lacking for the subject, and clinical practice demonstrates that in such circumstances, it is the body that takes the relief (just think of the dissociation and the ubiquitous psychosomatic symptoms

Hence, in these two paradigmatic cases, this jouissance of the organism can be understood in another way than the dreamt-of feminine 'other' jouissance of the Encore-seminar. It does not bring us any closer to the hoped-for relationship between the man and the woman — between the phallus and the body — no, it has everything to do with the opposition between activity and passivity, which first of all finds its expression in the relationship between the subject and the drive, that is, the Real of the body. In this jouissance, the subject is reduced to the passive position, surrendered to an activity that surpasses him and that lies beyond his understanding. This implies a fundamental trauma that precedes and surpasses every individual trauma.

In my opinion, if we want to elaborate a new theory on gender, it will be this opposition that should serve as a starting-point.

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