

Neutrality, *Indifferenz* and Desire of the Analyst

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The “motor” of an analysis is the strange connection that the analysand forms with their analyst: Freud called it transference, or even “transference love”. The status of this love is quite troubling, both for the analyst as well as the analysand, not to mention the general population that tends to view this love with an uneasy suspicion. Breuer was horrified when he realized that Anna O. had produced a hysterical pregnancy out of her love for him. He fled, abandoning her treatment. Freud, on the other hand persisted. He advocated a position of “neutrality” in relation to transference love, which allowed him to discover the unconscious, and to pursue his exploration of it.

This “neutrality,” in orthodox psychoanalytic circles, is taken to be an “objective” response to what is seen as a “false” or “neurotic” love. The analyst, undisturbed in his “objective” position does not confuse transference with “true” love. However, this characterization of transference is actually unsupportable from a psychoanalytic perspective, at least in Lacan’s view. Lacan showed that transference is not merely a product of the analysand, but that it is a structure that always includes the analyst. Transference is in fact the fundamental structure of all human relations, which is why it is so powerful. If this is the case, how then can the analyst have a position of “neutrality”? Or should the analyst even strive for such a position? Yet Lacan argued that Freud in adhering to a position that Freud called “neutral” was able to persist and to discover the formations of the unconscious. So what exactly was Freud’s position?

Freud first explicitly invoked the psychoanalyst’s ‘neutrality’ (Strachey’s translation for *Indifferenz*) in “Observations on Transference-Love” (Freud, 1958). In a discussion of the diffi-

culties dealing with erotic impulses elicited in the analysand due to transference, Freud considered several possible options. He noted that denying on moral grounds the satisfaction of the analysand's demands merely reinforces repression. This is comparable to "... summoning up a spirit from the underworld ... [only] to send him down again without having asked him a single question." He also rejected returning the patient's impulses as "fond feelings but at the same time avoiding any physical implementation of this fondness ..." noting that any compliance on the part of the analyst, in the hopes that it would gain "domination over his patient and thus enable him to influence her to perform the tasks required by treatment" is more likely to result in the satisfaction of the hysteric's aims and not those of the analyst.

Freud's solution was "... we ought not give up the neutrality [*Indifferenz*] towards the patient, which we have acquired through keeping the counter-transference in check." (Freud, 1958, p. 164)¹

He added "I have already let it be understood that analytic technique requires of the physician that he should deny to the patient who is craving for love the satisfaction she demands ... [T]he patient's need and longing should be allowed to persist in her, in order that they may serve as forces impelling her to do work and to make changes, and that we must beware of appeasing these forces by means of surrogates."

The notion of neutrality also stems from Freud's abandonment of hypnosis and suggestion, and with it his abandonment of actively directing a patient's thoughts and attention. Instead, in his recommendations for the technique of mastering the material of a treatment, he ad-

¹ Freud, S. 1989. "Ich meine also, man darf die Indifferenz, die man sich durch die Niederhaltung der Gegenüberung erworben hat, nicht verleugnen." p. 224

vised “. . . it consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly suspended attention’ (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears.” (Freud, 1958, p. 111)

In 1956 Roger Money-Kyrle, in a key paper on counter-transference, echoed Freud’s position when he stated that the term ‘neutrality’ means “. . . that the analyst is concerned for the welfare of his patient without becoming emotionally involved in his conflicts . . . it also implies, I think, that the analyst in virtue of his understanding of psychic determinism has a certain kind of tolerance which is the opposite of condemnation, and yet by no means the same as indulgence or indifference.” (Money-Kyrle, 1978, p. 360) Here we run up against what appears to be a contradiction: *Indifferenz*, in Money-Kyrle’s definition, is “by no means the same . . . as indifference”. This requires a brief discussion of Freud’s term.

Indifferenz, “non-difference,” is not the equivalent of the English “indifference,” which is more commonly translated by the German word *gleichgültigkeit*. This word implies, as does the English “indifference,” an affective disinterest, and can have a negative connotation: “uncaring,” for example.

While Strachey’s translation of *Indifferenz* as “neutrality” avoided the implicit negative connotations of “indifference” in English, it is curious that Freud did not use the German term *Neutralität*. In fact, *Indifferenz* is a rather uncommon term. Perhaps Freud used *Indifferenz* for its reference to physics where it connotes a stable equilibrium: the stability of a pendulum means that it will return to its original position after its initial displacement by a force, or an object with a low center of gravity is more stable than one with a higher center of gravity.²

² "Indifferenz" is equivalent to "Grenzstabilität" which comes from physics; See <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indifferenz>. See also "Stability Theory"; <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grenzstabilität>

In advising analysts “not to give up” their *Indifferenz*, Freud is referring to an interest that doesn't allow the patient's demands to displace the analyst from an equilibrium that permits attention to be paid to the unconscious.

Indifferenz is a stability that allows the practice of “evenly suspended attention” in which the analysand's “longing” is sustained and the analysis can progress.

Never-the-less the term “neutrality,” thanks to Strachey, has entered the Freudian lexicon. Questions regarding Freud's exact intention led Edmund Bergler to offer the phrase “benevolent neutrality.” (Bergler, 1937) Along with the majority of American psychoanalysts, the French analysts Daniel Lagache and Sacha Nacht took up Bergler's phrase. Meanwhile, Otto Kernberg described his concept of “technical neutrality,” formulated in the 1950s, as the means by which the psychoanalyst “interprets the meanings of the transference from a position of concerned objectivity.” (Kernberg, 1998, p. 74)

There also ensued a polemic over neutrality itself. Traditional psychoanalytic “neutrality” was criticized as an attitude embodying a scientific, research oriented practice to the detriment of the aim of “healing” the patient. One well known critic, Owen Renick, deplored “The Perils of Neutrality” (Renick, 1996) and advocated a “Practical Psychoanalysis” (Renick, 2006) that in place of the “objectivity” of the psychoanalyst, proposes “elective self disclosure” to deal with counter-transference issues. (Renick, 2008) In Renick's opinion this had the advantage of swifter symptom relief, and avoided the sterility of the supposed aim of “self-awareness” that he ascribed to the psychoanalytic orthodoxy.

A number of other critics, particularly those adherents of various relational schools, questioned the idea that it is even possible for the analyst to be “outside” of the analytic undertaking, observing and un-implicated in the exchange. They argued that the analyst is unavoidably influ-

encing the analysand. Paul Wachtel wrote: "So-called neutrality is but one more way of participating in the events of the therapeutic process, and is no less likely to influence ensuing events than any other way of participating." (Wachtel, 1982, p. 263).

In my estimation, the debate stems from a misunderstanding of ". . . the actual instrument of their work." (Lacan, 1981, p. 18) If the critics of the orthodoxy correctly sense that the psychoanalyst is implicated in the process, this does not mean that an analysis is engaged solely with the exchange within a supposed patient and analyst dyad. What is at stake is not a duality, but that a third element intervenes. While it is not simple to grasp what it means to maintain an "evenly suspended attention in the face of all that one hears," it is clear from this statement that the praxis of psychoanalysis is a matter of being engaged in a particular way with listening to speech. Speech is the "instrument of [psychoanalytic] work," but speech must be understood as something other than a vessel for the conveyance, or "communication" of meaning. What the analyst listens for are the breaks, gaps, hesitations, etc. in speech where meaning stumbles and what appears is what Lacan labeled the "non-realized." (Lacan, 1981, p. 22) The analysand may believe that they are expressing themselves in speaking, but what they discover is that they have no idea what they are actually saying; that every speech act is at its base a demand addressed to the Other.³

The premise of every demand — always a demand for love — is that the Other, to whom the demand is addressed, is complete and thus allows the speaking being to believe, transitively, in the possibility of their own completeness. However, any response from the Other is doomed to fall short. If behind every demand for the satisfaction of a need is a demand for absolute love,

³ The Other is several things in Lacanian terminology: The adult caretaker, or someone in later life modeled on the original caretaker, who appears to the infant as omnipotent, able to give — or withhold — whatever the infant needs, and whose decision to give or withhold, is taken as a sign of love. The Other is initially seen as a totality, as complete without flaws or lacks. The Other is also the locus of the Symbolic: the repository and source of language and of the law.

then whatever addresses the need — however satisfactorily — leaves the demand for love still open. Even when the Other responds “I love you!” it is still possible to ask “But why?” or any number of other attempts to obtain that bit of certainty that the answer never quite provides.

There is always a remainder, that portion of the real⁴ that can never be articulated in the signifying chain, which endlessly provokes another demand for a complete signification with the same unsatisfying response. Lacan named this remainder *objet petit a*, the object left over by the speech act. Although the “a” in *objet petit a* (object small a) derived originally in relation to the *autre* (other), the semblance or likeness, as opposed to the *Autre* (Other), Lacan advised retaining it untranslated, because it had evolved in his usage into a something more akin to an algebraic term, and no longer carried the same reference to *autre*. *Objet petit a* is a very peculiar object in that it is a lacking object. It is an object in the sense that it is what is sought in the demand — the object that could bring total completion, but it is also a lack, in that it can never be materially delivered. It is an objectification of absence. It can “appear” for example in the Uncanny, or in the experience of *deja vu*, where its presence produces anxiety.

Rather than accept that the object is unattainable, the Other’s unsatisfying response is taken as a “No,” ultimately associated with the law and what is forbidden. The Other’s response is understood to indicate that their desire is directed elsewhere, towards a love object other than the infant who articulates the demand. In this way speech as a third element introduces castration and interdiction into any human exchange, which gives rise to desire.

⁴ The real is one of three registers, along with the imaginary (register of images and identifications) and the symbolic (register of language and signification). The real is to be understood as what falls outside of the other registers. It is linked to them, but some portion of it always escapes. We can speak of death, or give it images, but we cannot ever fully grasp it. That ungraspable aspect can only be supposed, like an unknown algebraic x , which is how the *objet petit a* should be viewed.

In essence, every instance of speech is engaged in the Oedipal triangle, in which the speaker runs aground on the rock of castration, since castration is the loss generated by the functioning of language. Language itself introduces the symbolic function of the father who forbids incest and bars the union between mother and infant. As Freud shows, castration is the price to be paid for entrance into society. It is the law (incest taboo) that gives rise to indestructible desire as the corollary of this price, desire that is caused by the loss of *objet petit a*, which plays out in the metonymic shifting from one object to the next. All speaking beings, regardless of gender, are subject to the incest taboo and the price of castration.

This essential function is embodied in the transference — comprised of the analysand's speech addressed to and including the analyst as Other. Only a position of *Indifferenz* allows the analyst to hear the formations of the unconscious, where the analysand's speech says something other than what was consciously intended, and that evokes the Oedipus Complex. In response to this speech, the *Indifferenz* of the analyst sustains the "No" of the law and sustains the incest taboo.

Indifferenz in the face of the demands of the analysand is a testimony to Freud's single-minded pursuit. Freud, unlike Breuer, was not derailed by the encounter with a hysteric's demand for love, but instead remained "stable" in the face of it, sustaining his position and, according to Lacan, sustaining his desire as a psychoanalyst.

The desire of the psychoanalyst is not a question of an affect experienced by the analyst. Desire is not to be understood as a psychological reference to a subjectivity, to passions. Desire should not be confused with pleasure. The pleasure principle, according to Freud, is one of homeostasis. Desire, on the other hand, Freud categorized as indestructible. Desire is caused by what is left over as a result of the functioning of language and is an effect of language alone.

Freud's desire, in Lacan's opinion, is what allowed Freud entry to the mechanisms of the unconscious. (Lacan, 1981, p. 12)

On the face of it, we are confronted by the implications of this claim with another apparent contradiction, in which *Indifferenz* is somehow equated with desire. To understand this, the term "desire" requires an explanation.

This indestructibility of desire is something that the analysand, due to castration anxiety, does not acknowledge, responding instead with phantasms and symptoms, refusing to acknowledge that it is not possible to ultimately obtain that missing piece, refusing to accept castration. Within the transference, the analysand's supposition is that the analyst is in possession of the object, and knows how the analysand could obtain it — the analyst is supposed by the analysand to know the ultimate answer to the analysand's unhappiness, supposed to know how to avoid castration.

However, the analyst must never make the mistake of actually believing they are in possession of this knowledge. Through the experience of their own analysis, in acknowledging their own castration and in sustaining desire, what the analyst knows is that to answer — to step out of the position of *Indifferenz* — would be to take one's self as exempt from any loss and therefore not recognizing oneself as castrated and desiring. It would make the analyst complicit with the analysand's efforts to avoid recognizing the incest taboo. In respect to this Lacan asserted, in his Seminar *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse* [*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*], "The only thing for which one could be culpable, at least from the analytic perspective, is to have given up on one's desire." (Lacan, 1986, p. 368)

To give up on one's desire is to refuse to recognize it, either through the phantasm of being "complete," or through a surrender in the face of the indestructibility of desire. Desire has an

ethical dimension because desire arises in relation to the law, to the incest taboo, and is a manner in which the law is recognized.

The desire of the analyst is a support of the real (*objet petit a*), always the same unknown x that can't be articulated. The desire of the analyst, insisting on this x (*Indifferenz* of the pendulum), does not allow the analysand to avoid a confrontation with castration.

The functioning of the desire of the analyst through non-response to the demand reconfirms for the analysand the impossibility of the satisfaction of desire: there is no final response, only partial responses. This will eventually lead for the analysand to the discovery that the *objet petit a* is not the object of a demand, it is not an obtainable object that is somehow missing or held out of reach. Rather, it causes desire because it is irremediably lost, no one has it. Through assuming this castration, the missing object can be mourned and ultimately abandoned, transformed from a lack into a loss.

Substitution becomes a possibility: relinquishing the quest for the forbidden, incestuous object, seeking instead a replacement that is perhaps similar, but ultimately a *different* one. The analysand discovers a new position in relation to *objet petit a*, ceasing to aim towards it, ceasing to hope to reclaim some lacking thing the absence of which is a constant source of unhappiness. Rather the *objet petit a* is situated as a lost object, behind the speaking being, as cause of their desire, pushing them forward.

Transference, as it embodies the fundamental structure of human exchange, engages both analyst and analysand in a process that engenders a loss. If the analyst manages to sustain their desire, as the cure progresses it will more and more substantiate this lost object. At the conclusion of a cure the analysand will abandon the belief in the illusory figure of the analyst as omnipotent Other, recognizing that it is nothing more than a remainder, *objet petit a*, that can be dropped.

In 1970 Lacan stated that the analyst occupies the position of *objet petit a* in the cure, and “. . . this is the only meaning that one could give to analytic neutrality . . .” The analyst does not partake in passions, but rather occupies an “uncertain zone” in which, from a position of loss, the analyst puts the analysand to work on discovering the path of their own desire. (Lacan, 2007, p. 136) This is the “neutrality,” the *Indifferenz*, the desire of the analyst.

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