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RUTI, MARI. 'The fall of fantasies: A Lacanian reading of lack'. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 2008, 56, 2, pp. 483-508.

Mari Ruti has made a valuable contribution to the dialogue between clinicians and philosophers, especially for those, such as myself, who consider psychoanalysis a practice of 'applied philosophy'. One of the great values of this paper is Ruti's fluid use of non-Lacanian language and concepts (mostly borrowed from psychoanalysis) to describe Lacan's densely philosophical ideas regarding ontological lack. In addition, Ruti discusses the clinical application of these concepts from several perspectives.

First, Ruti explains that Lacan is interested in what it means 'for human beings to face their radical negativity or nothingness, and to wrestle with the recognition that their lives are built on unstable ground'. She states that she is limiting her paper to early Lacanian theory and 'particularly the relationship that Lacan draws between the subject's inner lack and the creative potentialities of the psyche' (p.486). She explains that ontological lack is not to be confused with ideas of deprivation or situational 'lack' as a consequence of childhood traumas, abusive personal histories, or oppressive social conditions. Rather, ontological lack is the void around which we are constituted as subjects. We can never fill this lack although the ego attempts to cover it over by narcissistic fantasies that generate a reassuring sense of self-coherence and completion.

Ruti explicates the Lacanian thesis that the ego is formed during the preverbal, imaginary mirror stage when the child sees its flawless specular image (either in a mirror or mother's eyes) and misrecognizes this coherent, non-fragmented image as itself. The ego becomes relentlessly driven to restore this impossible image of utopian wholeness. Since this yearning for completion is a fantasied longing for a state of oceanic bliss that never existed, the ego becomes caught in imaginary identifications with 'wholeness'. Thus there begins a never-ending quest for 'the Thing' that offers the (impossible) promise of completion and harmony. Although narcissistic fantasies divert a person from the richness of life's possibilities, the trade-off is evasion from the existential anxiety of living with the awareness that life is contingent, and that, ultimately, we do not have any positive or stable identity. For Lacan, the possibility of a stabilizing and reassuring transcendent 'sovereign good' as the basis for life is always already foreclosed.

Ruti describes how the subject's constitutive negativity is connected to language-- i.e. the collective structures of signification and meaning production that exist prior to the child's birth—in and through which psychic life emerges. Entry into the symbolic world via language acquisition inserts the child into the coercive world of collective rules and regulations. This world carries a force of prohibition, as the child is punished for deviating from cultural norms, 'giving the child her first bitter taste of wanting what she cannot have. As a consequence it generates lack—the relentless sense of incompleteness that characterizes human existence—as the melancholy side of social subjectivity' (p. 487). Thus, constitutive lack is an inevitable consequence of entering the social realm of meanings and values.

However, lack does not in itself point to a diminished world, but rather is also that which generates desire and opens the possibility for creative engagement with the world—'lack gives rise to a self that is open to—and ravenous for—the world' (p.489). It is only through the recognition of the *impossibility* of filling the ontological void around which the subject is constituted that a subject can, in turn, recognize the ways in which their desire has been distorted in response to the demands of the Other (defined as the socio-cultural symbolic systems in which we are embedded). When the subject achieves some flexibility to free their desire from subjection to the demands of the Other, new possibilities are generated for creatively engaging with the world.

The collapse of our most cherished narcissistic fantasies can create an opening for the 'truth' of our desire, enabling it to break through the deceptive defenses of the ego¹. Rather than only and automatically responding to the demands of the symbolic Other, i.e. the normative discourses that result in life-deadening conformity, 'such a subject is able to enter into the ongoing process of fashioning a singular identity in accordance with the complexity of her desire' (p.504). Paradoxically, desire is only possible because we have entered the symbolic world of meanings and values. This means that although language can deprive us of our singularity, it is also through language that one can challenge hegemonic discourses. The use of 'poetic' language – language that cuts through 'congealed forms of meaning' – allows us to find singular and particular ways of inhabiting our place in the symbolic order.

A theme woven throughout this article is the clinical application of the concept of 'lack'. Ruti emphasizes that the analyst is also constituted by lack, and that the analyst must embrace her own lack, thereby incorporating for the analysand the truth that 'leading a reasonable life

¹ This calls to mind Colman's clinically rich paper *Imagination and the Imaginary*. However, the ideas in Ruti's paper and Colman's are not comparable due to the difference in their ontological assumptions. See: Colman, W. (2006), 'Imagination and the imaginary'. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 51: 21–41.

does not presuppose seamless psychic integration' (p.502). Ruti states that 'the task of the Lacanian analyst is not to offer definitive answers to the patient's questions, but *merely* [my emphasis] to provide an analytic space where it becomes possible for the patient to arrive at singular kinds of answers' (p.506). This is where the value of ongoing dialogue between clinicians and philosophical writers becomes evident. I agree that the analyst's stance is to facilitate the analysand's singularity rather than to prescribe answers, and I greatly admire Ruti's ability to convey dense philosophical ideas. However, the adverb 'merely' doesn't adequately convey the difficulty of establishing a space for the painful and terrifying collapse of an analysand's most cherished fantasies. The existential difficulty of living with an awareness of the void of our being, or the visceral shock experienced when our fantasies collapse², are also understated by the metaphors she uses throughout the paper to describe ontological lack: e.g. melancholy, fog horn, muted echo. These are romantic terms that don't capture the terror, horror and pain that I often feel in the consulting room via my embodied countertransference when faced with the analysand's 'fall of fantasies' or collapse of identity.

Ruti concludes her paper with an emphasis on singularity:

One could in fact say that the process of becoming a singular subject, from a distinctively Lacanian point of view, is first and foremost a matter of knowing that even though the question of the "sovereign good" is from the outset closed, questions that sustain us as creatures of becoming and psychic potentiality—questions pertaining to desire, creativity, and the passion of self-actualization...are ones that can be closed only by our own (non) actions (p. 507).

This is the point where the paper evoked a particular disturbance in me. By choosing to engage with only one aspect of 'early' Lacan, Ruti creates an 'historical' Lacan whose thought can be divided into neat epochs, thus allowing her to emphasize the *creative* subject who has the capacity to question and engage in the world for the sake of 'self-realization'. However, by creating an 'early' Lacan, her paper excludes the *ethical* subject who is primordially called to struggle with the uncanny *other-with-an-unconscious* (the particular fantasy organization of the other's jouissance). Ruti emphasizes how narcissistic fantasies limit our creative engagement with the world, but she does not articulate the danger of these narcissistic fantasies to the actual other in a contingent world where the "sovereign good" is always already foreclosed. The emergence of the ethical subject is taken up in Lacan's 'later' work where he elaborates the relationship between the kernel of the Real and jouissance as the unknowable, untranslatable,

² For a description of the clinical impact of these issues, two papers come to mind: Hinton, L. (2007), 'Black holes, uncanny spaces and radical shifts in awareness'. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 52: 433–447 and Austin, S. (2009), 'Jung's dissociable psyche and the ec-static self'. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 54: 581–599.

core of our being³. The ethical subject is also taken up by those who have elaborated Lacan's ideas—e.g. Butler, Santner, Laplanche and Žižek⁴.

In this paper Ruti engages the big 'Other' only as synonymous with the symbolic order equated with language and the law. There is no mention of the actual other, (emphasized, e.g. in the work of Laplanche) where *another subject* takes the place of the big Other and embodies both the demands of the symbolic order *and* radical alterity. Ruti posits self-reflexivity as a basis for our singularity as subjects; it allows us to shape creative possibilities for our own lives. However, the capacity for self-reflexivity also enables us to question and reflect on the ways in which we unconsciously demand that those actual others (who are also subjects) conform to our narcissistic fantasies. It allows us to reflect on our response to the other's dense particularity when confronted with their disturbing alterity. This capacity to bear anxiety in the face of the gap of our own being also allows us to bear the anxiety of the unknowable gap in the other. In other words, lack not only facilitates the emergence of a subject with the capacity for generating creative new possibilities for his or her own life, but lack also gives rise to an ethical subject.

At a macro level, narcissistic conceits that promise self-coherence, artificially closing the gap in our being by generating comforting fantasies of wholeness, become the ideologies of groups. And when an individual does not conform to the demands of the group's ideological assumptions, then the stage is set for the annihilation of the other (as has repeatedly occurred in modern genocides). It is the ethical subject who can question narcissistic fantasies and collective ideologies. This questioning opens the space to imagine new possibilities for engaging with the other, whether the familiar neighbor or the uncanny stranger. If we only focus on the subject of creativity and self-realization and neglect to articulate the responsible ethical subject, there is a risk that we will fail to illuminate the everyday 'little violences' that we and our analysands unconsciously perpetrate against the other. And without a binary focus on creativity and ethics, there is the likelihood of perpetuating conformity, stagnant thinking, and psychic violence through adherence to the ideologies that shape our psychoanalytic discourses.

References:

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³ After completing this review, I was introduced to another paper by Ruti that brilliantly discusses the relationship of singularity and character-formation emerging in response to the Real and jouissance; she draws on the work of Žižek, Santner, Župancic and Badiou to articulate the value of 'rebelliousness' as a way to break through the oppression of normative sociality. See: Ruti, M. (2010). 'The singularity of being: Lacan and the immortal within'. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Assoc.*, 58, 1113-1138.

⁴ See references

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