

Psychotherapy as a problem: Nine Lacanian points of refusal

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Psychoanalysis is 'psychotherapeutic' in the broadest sense of the term, but what are the clinical implications of Lacanian psychoanalysis reducing itself to psychotherapy? The encounter between analyst and 'analysand' (who is usually positioned in therapeutic discourse as the 'patient' or 'client') will, of course, include elements of psychotherapy and even of counselling. The unravelling of the self and of the comforting well-worn narratives of personal history that hold a sense of identity in place may be unbearable. This task of reflexive deconstruction that an analysand embarks upon in psychoanalysis is very difficult, and they may hesitate at times for good reason, or for bad reasons that it may be necessary to honour. However, sensitivity to these issues means that it is even more important that the psychoanalyst is able, when appropriate, to direct the treatment to open the way to analysis, to open the way to the unconscious rather than close it down.

There are an ever-increasing number of varieties of psychotherapy on offer now, which may focus on cognitive processes (the reframing of negative thoughts into positive ones), humanistic ideals (the giving of genuine warm empathic support) or even psychodynamic aspects of the self (finding meaning in symptoms and relationship patterns). What these different forms of psychotherapy draw upon are everyday commonsensical images of what the individual is like, images of our 'individual psychology' that it is precisely the task of psychoanalysis to disturb and undo. To put the Lacanian argument against psychotherapy at its strongest here may also indicate how psychotherapy, which appears to provide a progressive alternative to everyday common-sense images of psychology, is so often merely the twin to those images. It is in this sense that psychoanalysis is incompatible with psychotherapy.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, faithful to the original Freudian project of subversion and enlightenment, has revolutionary implications for our understanding of the individual subject and for the transformation of society, but the subject of analysis has more to lose than their chains. Although the analysand may initially seek relief from a painful symptom, it is another matter entirely to give up a symptom that also by its very nature provides so much comfort and satisfaction. Practitioners of a Lacanian approach will carefully attend to those moments in which the analysis slides into psychotherapy, and there will be times when the therapeutic aspects of the work will predominate.

Against this background, we can specify nine points of refusal that mark the difference between Lacanian psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

1. The attainment of empathy serves to sabotage what is most radical about psychoanalysis, for the sense that one has empathised with another serves to make them the same as oneself. This is the fundamental error of hermeneutics that aims to 'understand' the other. Against this reduction to the level of 'imaginary' identification, the task of the Lacanian psychoanalyst is 'to obtain absolute difference'.

2. The attempt to bring about some form of harmonisation between aspects of the self serves to cover over the contradictions that make someone into a human subject in the first place. Instead of trying to make the unconscious consistent with consciousness or, worse, trying to wipe it out altogether, Lacanian psychoanalysis attends to the ways in which each subject deals with their own points of impossibility.

3. The notion that we should dispel illusion and bring about a more veridical relation to the social world serves to obscure the ways in which every image of 'reality' is always already suffused with fantasy. To speak the truth in Lacanian psychoanalysis has nothing to do with accurate perception, and moments of truth for the analysand will precisely be those moments when they find a way of speaking in and against what is usually taken to be empirically true.

4. The idea that we should search under the surface of spoken interaction and excavate a deeper reality behind language serves to mislead us as to where the unconscious is and how it works. The unconscious as 'the discourse of the other' lies in the gaps, stumbling points in speech, and for the subject to speak from the unconscious is for them to find a way out of the romantic fantasy that there is something hidden that can be unearthed.

5. The idea that we should educate someone about what is right or wrong or as to how they should understand themselves is anathema to Lacanian psychoanalysis, and serves to turn psychotherapy into the privilege of an expert caste. Every moment the analyst thinks they know best is a moment of ethical failure that betrays the task of opening a space for the analysand to make of their own analysis their own ethical practice.

6. To attempt to normalise certain kinds of behaviour or experience may in the short term bring relief, but it serves to adapt the subject all the more efficiently to an idea of what is normal. Lacanian psychoanalysis does not work with any categories that divide the normal from the abnormal, still less does it treat the 'ordinary unhappiness' that can be made out of hysterical misery at the end of analysis into something 'normal'.

7. To treat certain kinds of behaviour or experience as pathological merely serves to transform them from things that the analyst may not understand into elements of a moral and moralising narrative. Lacanian psychoanalysis does not use descriptions of clinical structure to identify what should be changed, but to comprehend the direction of the treatment, and 'resistance', for example, is viewed as 'on the side of the analyst' not the analysand.

8. To render treatment into a process that can be made susceptible to prediction as part of 'evidence-based' practice serves to close off what is most illuminating about the work of analysis. Lacanian psychoanalysis retrieves from Freud the notion of 'deferred action', in which it is only after an event that we make it into something traumatic or something that may then be narrated in and out of the analysis.

9. To promote rationality as the touchstone of conscious understanding serves to divide rationality from irrationality, and to reify both. Lacanian psychoanalysis opens a space for 'rational' reflection following those moments in which 'irrationality' comes into play through forms of 'act' that change the symbolic co-ordinates of a life and which then call for interpretation.

Different forms of psychotherapy are an eclectic mixture of these elements - weighted differently in cognitive, humanistic and psychodynamic schools - and it is understandable that some of them chime with popular images of psychology and also to be attractive to clinical psychologists. However, empathy, harmony, empirical truth, hidden meanings, moral education, normalisation, pathologisation, predictive validity and rationality are not notions that challenge the way that common-sense understandings circulate in Western culture. Psychotherapy complements these common-sense understandings of the individual, and there is always a risk that psychoanalysis which reduces itself to psychotherapy will fall into line with practices that attempt to adapt people to society. Dominant forms of 'psychoanalysis' in the English-speaking world have done exactly that.

Some forms of 'psychotherapy' pretend to be part of a radical new alternative to old versions of treatment. This is all the more reason why therapeutic categories should be treated with suspicion by psychoanalysts, and that suspicion should be directed as much to the practice of psychotherapy when it operates as the soul of a spiritless condition under capitalism as to therapeutic ways of talking about the self, for these reproduce the worst of popular cognitivist, humanist, or spiritualised forms of ideological mystification. Lacanian psychoanalysis refuses to adapt itself to psychotherapeutic categories, and it refuses all forms of bourgeois psychology in its search for something more critical.