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Pleasure Acts Upon Us: Discussion of Commentaries by Dean and González

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In discussing these generous and generative commentaries, I note points of agreement and divergence with an eye toward clarifying my positions on perversity. As such, I explore the implications of my interlocutors' formidably concise articulations (González: perversion permits "the *materialization* of intergenerational too-muchness" [this issue, p. 282] and Dean: psychoanalysis is like "getting royally fucked by a dubious stranger" [this issue, p. 274]). Productively pressed by their queries, I refine the difference between sexuality and perversion and, drawing on Deleuze (1971), I flesh out important distinctions between sadism and the masochistic contract.

How else can one write but of those things which one doesn't know or knows badly? It is precisely there that we imagine we have something to say. We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border that separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other [Deleuze, **1968**, p. 158].

Perhaps appropriately, I found writing "To Suffer Pleasure" to be an arduous, tormenting process. Not only did it require "the seemingly impossible task of thinking about thinking about the impossible" (Corbett, **2000**, p. 777), it demanded that I gather into language barely articulable thoughts and then commit them to paper. "How are we to see, observe ... these things which are not visible?" Bion (**2005**, p. 38) asked in his Italian seminars. One answer is that we don't, at least not with our eyes—we can only reach for them, deducing them by means of their effects. But of course, to be able to register them as effects in the first place we have to be able to imagine that what we register harkens back to an ineffable "something else" (Dyess and Dean, **2000**), to be able to "dream up," as Ogden (**2005**) might say, an associative link between tangible and intangible.

The vagueness and lack of specificity of such formulations is unsteady. I consider myself fortunate, thus, that my work has found its way to Tim Dean and Francisco J. González, both close readers of psychoanalysis with a pronounced and inventive capacity to converse about and reflect on the unrepresented (e.g., Dean, **2009, 2012**; González, **2013**). Dean and González have engaged my project in its full complexity, treating perversity neither as intractable problem nor as romanticized solution. What a gift to read how my work is digested and extended through their minds. The result is a more lucid articulation of what I have been laboring to convey. No less important, reading their commentaries helps me discern what about my project of moving toward

rather than away from perversion's difficulty, a project that I feel is still in its early developmental stages, may benefit from further deliberation and refinement. In-depth theoretical explication and clinical illustration will surely follow in forthcoming work but, for now, I join them in a conversation kindled by their thoughtful comments.

To start, I was grateful for González's Laplancheian formulation that when working with sexuality, psychoanalysts are permeable to the intergenerational, enigmatically transmitted hand-me-downs of moralization. That the topic of sexuality chokes in anxiety (Dimen, 2001) and its regulatory variants (Corbett, 2008) is a known and widely accepted fact. González's elegant implication that these difficulties live inside us with recalcitrant tenacity because they are threaded into the fabric of how we are constituted as analysts serves as a shrill and sobering reminder of how genuinely difficult (not just anachronistically conservative) it is to think about sexuality expansively, how incredibly hard it is to turn neither to the condemnatory nor to the reactively celebratory.

Further illuminating in González's essay is his framing my take on perversion as "the *materialization* of intergenerational too-muchness" (this issue, p. 282). In this wonderfully crisp and concise phrase my interlocutor captures one of the most elusive parts of my argument. It is indeed this rendering of the psychic onto a material register that I believe perversion can accomplish. This is why perversity is so ideally suited for the dislodgment of signifiers that can, in turn, open up the subject to new translations of enigmatic transfers leading to a restitching of the self that is less tightly coiled around the parental unconscious. Enigmatic chunks are indispensable indeed in the tender for "untrammelled pleasure" that "lay[s] the burden of generations down" (this issue, p. 282). For clarification's sake, I also want to highlight here that this kind of process is precisely that: a process. *Perversity slouches toward the ego's collapse*: the collapse manifests in a singular moment but the momentum that culminates in the breakdown accrues over time. A psychoanalytic exploration of the effects of the ego's fracturing is also a process that unfolds over time. The goal is to help the patient find "the links between ego and body" (this issue, p. 283). For González, this is achieved through a reclaiming of the body from the clutches of falsified social compliances—it is the latter that shatters in the course of the ego's rupture. For me, what shattering makes possible is a set of new iterations of the self, which arise as one becomes increasingly freer from the enigmatic annexation of the parental other. The two are, of course, always interdigitated; in the example of the diaper-changing father or the nursing mother that I discussed in my essay, the inhibitions that arise from the anxiety of homoeroticism and of incestuous prohibition bear heavily the marks of social, are inflected by fantasy and defense, and arise in the interstices of inner with outer life.

NORMATIVE PERVERSION AND PERVERSION

"One could make a strong case," González writes, that the tidal wave of shattering is not partial to perverse iterations but that it "defines sexuality tout court" (this issue, p. 279). I linger for a moment on this point because I am afraid that without further clarification this claim might temper what I think of as the unique properties of perversity. I agree with González that the fervor of nonperverse sexuality may, too, on some occasions affect productive dysregulations. In those instances, however, the self's undoing is merely epiphenomenal, an unintended side effect. By contrast, in perversion the ego's tear is the unconsciously reached-for effect—what I call "perversity's aspiration." Whereas all sexuality, thus, may stumble upon ego shattering, the concerted effort *toward* the unraveling of the self is the exclusive territory of perversion.

If “desire wants something *now*” (González, 2013, p. 112; italics added), pleasure that is suffered is aspirational, it gestures toward futurity. As “a spectacular mode of access to the future” rather than a “betoken[ing of] ... the past” (Dean, this issue, p. 275), it harnesses the unarticulable past offering up an opening to new ways of being. Perversion and its pleasures move us to thinking teleologically (as opposed to our reflexive etiological inclinations) beyond the past and into the future of emergent possibility.

I remind us here that perversity does not inhere in particular sexual acts but is defined by the distinctive role that transgression plays in ego-dislocating pleasure. What assails the ego is perversity’s ravenous grab, its insatiable reach. This is because perversion is fueled by hungrily escalating excitations that aim to disrupt the structural integrity of the self. Its ecstatic pleasures can usher in an explosion of the ego’s boundedness releasing sensory morsels coated in affects with tethers to unformulated states (Stern, 2003). These transiently burst the subject out of the encasement of the self to release previously unrepresented bits. More personal meanings swirl through these enigmatic signifiers; by the time the self recoheres, one’s ego has been brought more into one’s own possession.

Therefore, in González’s example the unspoiled virgin may have her hymen torn but I am not sure that this somatic breach is in itself sufficient to evoke the kind of cleavage in the crevasses where one encounters enigma and the unspeakable. It is not the unfamiliar or the untried that defines sexualities that carry the potential for the self’s dismantling. Transgression, we may recall, can map itself onto a wide array of sexual acts ranging from the bizarre and outlandish to the ordinary and prosaic. Anal sexuality, for example; penis-in-vagina sex; acrobatic sex while suspended from the ceiling are all equally viable candidates for perversion as long as they are subjectively experienced as overwhelming.

It is interesting at this juncture to note González’s qualifier that some perverse sexualities have the precisely opposite goal from that of ego shattering, namely, to stabilize and solidify the ego. Certain varieties of voyeurism or even perhaps the thuddingly boring, obligatory sex of conjugality can serve precisely that rigid master, González tells us. I couldn’t agree more. At the same time, though, let us note that González seems to be utilizing here the nature of the sexual act as the defining feature of perversion. For this, I have to assume some responsibility. I am aware that in my choice to retain the term *perversion*, I have risked a certain confusion of tongues. The term has had a long and difficult history. Nevertheless, I have not—at least not yet—been able to find a term that captures the edge, that denotes the overflow and abundance that *perversion* does.

In closing my comments to González, I admit that I remain a bit more reserved than he seems to be in drawing as sharp a distinction between the normative trauma of implantation that ontologically tilts sexuality toward a certain enjoyment of perversity and the transmission of intergenerational trauma that González believes is more likely to produce what he describes as “frank sexual masochism” (this issue, p. 282). I lack his confidence in orderly separating the two, and this concern reappears for me with regard to his differentiation between “the near complete obliteration of one’s will” and a “temporary transcendence of the ego through its effacement” (this issue, p. 280). My worry about the precision with which he draws that line is that, in the clinical moment, one can easily be mistaken for the other. Oftentimes it is, in fact, countertransference anxiety—if not panic—that adjudicates the matter. This is reflected in de M’Uzan’s (1973) report that promises to explicate in depth the dynamic factors in a patient’s “extreme masochistic fantasies.” Is there any area of human functioning other than that of sexual

deviation where we would accept de M'Uzan's exhaustive "outline of a theory" on the basis of clinical data that derive "not from analytic treatment or psychotherapy, but from two consultations" with

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a patient that the analyst “did not wish to” (p. 455) even admit into treatment? Does our need to make such distinctions in the first place index our collective worry that each inch of creative space conceded to sexuality has to immediately be countered by the offering of a revised criterion of sexual health?

As I turn my attention to Dean’s commentary, I start by saying that I find a tremendous amount in his response that I would love to take up and converse with him about in greater depth. More specifically, I am compelled by his commitment to the work that risk does in sexuality (Dean, 2009, this issue)—although I wonder if pitting risk against safety is as essential as Dean finds it to be. “In certain circumstances” he writes, “safety appears as positively unethical” (this issue, p. 275). I read Dean to be saying that there are life circumstances where an overinvestment in safety is positively dangerous, and assuming I read him correctly I absolutely agree that safety does not just protect but that it also constricts, limits, even deprives. The loss of a risk not taken is impossible to measure or mourn—a lesson I was fortunate to learn in my own analysis.

I am also very interested in Dean’s thinking on identity and specifically in his point that “progressive politics encourages us to understand sexuality as a vital component of *identity*, thereby allowing us conveniently to forget the unconscious dimensions of sex” (this issue, pp. 269–270). This is a position with which I agree (see Saketopoulou, in press-a) and one which, I believe, can be productively complicated (I do return to his ideas on identity later to approach them from a slightly different angle). And last but not least, I would be curious to hear more about how my take on perversion augments his understanding of his work on barebacking. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I feel that I have to turn away from these sirens and tie myself to the mast if I am to remain disciplined to the particular task at hand—the elucidation of my thinking on perversion. My hope is that future opportunities will permit us to engage further around these issues.

PERVERSION AS STRUCTURAL MASOCHISM

Dean sees my use of perversion as isomorphic to masochism, citing my discussion of Adam as illustrative of masochistic submission. In a forthcoming article, I discuss in depth clinical material from the treatment of a female practitioner of sadomasochism whose case presents remarkable dynamic similarities with the material in the essay under discussion here (Saketopoulou, in press-b). Still, reflecting on Dean’s observation has given me the opportunity to refine something I had not fully thought through when writing my essay. Please bear with me for a moment while we take a circuitous route to the point I am trying to make.

For Freud (1905), sadism and masochism existed as inverse and complementary forms of the unitary phenomenon of sadomasochism. Freud struggled for most of his life with the question of which was primary versus which should be considered as a derivative form of the other (Freud, 1915, 1920, 1924, 1926). Drawing on the work of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, however, Deleuze (1971) made an interesting, if unexpected, point. Sadomasochism is not an amalgam of paired sexual inclinations. Sadism and masochism are completely distinct phenomena. Because the sadist definitionally acts against the other’s subjectivity and separateness, she operates outside the bounds of consent and is antithetically oriented to the other’s desire or pleasure. Deleuze contrasted this kind of sadism—which for our purposes I call structural sadism—to the masochistic impulse. The masochist derives her pleasure from the infliction of pain, from being placed in discomforted positions of her own orchestration, albeit not of her own

execution. The masochistic

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exchange reveals itself to be, thus, more similar to a paradoxically mutually agreed upon contract. The behavioral masochist and the behavioral sadist willingly participating in a scene (let's say Adam and his abject stranger) occupy, structurally speaking, a masochistic position because the process by which they arrive at their pleasures is dialectical. From this angle, then, the question is not about who delivers and who receives pain or humiliation but whether the (behavioral) masochist's desire is a factor in the construction of the sexual scenario. As such, both participants in the sort of contractual scene Adam and his jockstrapped stranger shared are (structural) masochists. Returning to my discussant's comments thus, the kind of perversity of which I am speaking is indeed always masochistic in the Deleuzian sense of the term.

ENTER, CLINICAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

In an interesting twist, Dean links my thinking about perversity as a site of emergent possibility with clinical praxis. This, to me, is a crucial association because conventional ways of working with perversions often assume that perverse sexual practices originate in internal space psychically organized at the level of representation. If we are to view perversity as having unique reach into the unrepresentable, this is an assumption we can no longer take for granted.

But Dean's investments lay elsewhere: Is "perhaps Saketopoulou ... inviting us to consider the scene of analysis as somehow analogous to getting royally fucked by a dubious stranger?" (this issue, p. 274), he asks. This is a question that, by the end of his essay, he seems to have resolved: "Going to see an analyst," he states definitively, "*is* like getting sling-fucked by a filthy stranger" (this issue, p. 275; italics added). And in a second, equally challenging, aporia: If perversity is capable of the kind of work with which I credit it, "on what grounds might the practice of psychoanalysis be prioritized over that of perversion?" (this issue, p. 269).

I read Dean's second query as one that pertains to therapeutic action: What, if anything, does psychoanalysis have to add to perversity's galvanizing dissolution of the ego? To that I have a straightforward answer: In my opinion, quite a bit. Of course, Dean is right to ask the question. Having not wanted to distract from my article's theoretical focus, I chose to not offer in my essay any in-depth clinical illustration of how my ideas may play out in the consulting room (but see Saketopoulou, in press-b). Although I cannot take on this task in this discussion, I offer here a short sketch of how I understand the analyst's contribution in working with perverse sexualities.

Enigma that is freed up by perversity's ego shattering circulates in psychic space unbound and indecipherable, untethered to associatively linked memory, history, and meaning. When its material manifestations (sensory traces) are brought into the consulting room to be explored in the presence of an analyst who is not too rigidly defended or oversaddled with anxiety, these unrepresented mental states can produce a "generative turbulence" (Civitarese, 2013) in the analyst's unconscious. This turbulence often manifests in spontaneous and unbidden acts (Stern, 2010)—the analyst's alpha function (Bion, 1967). When understood analytically, these enactments can help bring previously unformulated experience into being.¹ Put differently, psychoanalysis can be thought of as providing the psychic space where protoexperiences released through perversion's labor can hatch, where their emergent potential can come into existence.

¹ Botella and Botella (2005, 2013), Levine (2012), and Stern (2003, 2010) have all offered illustrative accounts of such clinical transformations although none, to my knowledge, have taken them up specifically in relation

to sexuality or perversion.

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If the attuned analyst's unconscious spontaneously intercepts the formless elements in the patient's unrepressed unconscious, shards of the analyst's own psychic interior end up becoming folded into the particular way in which the patient's unformulated experience becomes refigured. To understand this way the analyst's contribution to the restitching of the self carries serious implications: the patient's recohered self is not sovereign; experience that is birthed via this process is laced with the analyst's unconscious life.

This point is consonant with Dean's tussle with the concept of *identity*. "The danger" he writes, "lies in how progressive politics encourages us to understand sexuality as a vital component of *identity*, thereby allowing us conveniently to forget the unconscious dimensions of sex" (this issue, pp. 269–270). That unconscious dimension is, for Laplanche (1999), always infiltrated by the other: in normative development that other is the parent, whereas in analytic work it is the analyst whose constitutive effects inflect the patient's psyche. Is there an affinity between the notion that the reassembly of the self is threaded through the analyst's unconscious and Dean's proposition that being in analysis is akin to getting "fucked by a dubious stranger" (this issue, p. 274)? I have no objections—from either side of the couch—to the essence of Dean's formulation. The degree of cavernous and formative receptivity required of the patient may well be thought of as homologous to sexual incursion. And psychoanalysis has long spoken of the emotional as well as erotically tinged closeness required and developed in the strange intimacy of the analytic process. "What are you going *to do to me?*" a patient I recently began seeing in analysis asked me in tears upon lying on the couch for the first time. At the same time, I think it is important to add that patients may—and in fact, often do—come to psychoanalysis precisely for that kind of measured *and* rapturous intrusion.

Obviously, getting fucked can also have more sinister doer/done-to (Benjamin, 2004) overtones. When someone is doing the fucking, another may be getting *screwed*, perhaps *screwed over*. In its pathologizing discourses (on homosexuality, trans experience) and its more private abuses and boundary violations (Slochower, 2003; Dimen, 2011), psychoanalysis has, indeed, been guilty on several counts of screwing up.

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