

XXIII

The moral goals of psychoanalysis

THE BOURGEOIS DREAM

OEDIPUS, LEAR, AND THE SERVICE OF GOODS

THE INCORPORATION OF THE SUPEREGO

THE THREE FATHERS

UNRECONCILED OEDIPUS

At the point where I am about to bring to an end the risky topic that I chose to explore with you this year, I believe I cannot do enough to articulate the limit of the progress I wanted you to make.

I will spend next year outlining the ends and the means of analysis in relation to each other. Though that's not necessarily the title I will give the Seminar. It seems to me to be indispensable that we stop for a moment to consider something that remains obscure in what might be called the moral goals of psychoanalysis.

1

To promote in the practice of analysis a form of psychological normalization implies what might be called rationalizing moralization. Furthermore, to aim for the fulfillment of what is known as the genital stage, that is, a maturation of the drive and object, which would set the standard for a right relationship to reality, definitely embodies a certain moral implication.

Should the theoretical and practical purpose of our action be limited to the ideal of psychological harmonization? In the hope of allowing our patients to achieve the possibility of an untroubled happiness should we assume that the reduction of the antimony that Freud himself so powerfully articulated may be complete? I am referring to what he expresses in *Civilization and Its Discontents* when he affirms that the form in which the moral agency is concretely inscribed in man – and that is nothing less than rational according to him – the form he called the superego, operates according to an economy such that the more one sacrifices to it, the more it demands.

Are we entitled to forget that threat, that cleavage in the moral being of man, in the doctrine and practice of psychoanalysis? In truth, that is what happens; we are only too inclined to forget it, both in the promises that we believe we can make, and in those that we believe we can make to ourselves

in the matter of a given outcome of our therapy. It's serious, and it's even more serious when we are in a position to give to an analysis its full significance; I mean when we are faced by the conceivable end of an analysis in its training function in the fullest sense of the term.

If we are to consider an analysis completed for someone who is subsequently to find himself in a responsible position relative to an analysis, in the sense that he becomes an analyst himself, should it ideally or by right end with the position of comfort that I categorized just now as a moralizing rationalization of the kind in which it often tends to express itself?

When in conformity with Freudian experience one has articulated the dialectic of demand, need and desire, is it fitting to reduce the success of an analysis to a situation of individual comfort linked to that well-founded and legitimate function we might call the service of goods? Private goods, family goods, domestic goods, other goods that solicit us, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the city, etc.

Can we, in fact, close off that city so easily nowadays? It doesn't matter. However we regulate the situation of those who have recourse to us in our society, it is only too obvious that their aspiration to happiness will always imply a place where miracles happen, a promise, a mirage of original genius or an opening up of freedom, or if we caricature it, the possession of all women for a man and of an ideal man for a woman. To make oneself the guarantor of the possibility that a subject will in some way be able to find happiness even in analysis is a form of fraud.

There's absolutely no reason why we should make ourselves the guarantors of the bourgeois dream. A little more rigor and firmness are required in our confrontation with the human condition. That is why I reminded you last time that the service of goods or the shift of the demand for happiness onto the political stage has its consequences. The movement that the world we live in is caught up in, of wanting to establish the universal spread of the service of goods as far as conceivably possible, implies an amputation, sacrifices, indeed a kind of puritanism in the relationship to desire that has occurred historically. The establishment of the service of goods at a universal level does not in itself resolve the problem of the present relationship of each individual man to his desire in the short period of time between his birth and his death. The happiness of future generations is not at issue here.

As I believe I have shown here in the sphere I have outlined for you this year, the function of desire must remain in a fundamental relationship to death. The question I ask is this: shouldn't the true termination of an analysis – and by that I mean the kind that prepares you to become an analyst – in the end confront the one who undergoes it with the reality of the human condition? It is precisely this, that in connection with anguish, Freud designated as the level at which its signal is produced, namely, *Hilflosigkeit* or

distress, the state in which man is in that relationship to himself which is his own death – in the sense I have taught you to isolate it this year – and can expect help from no one.

At the end of a training analysis the subject should reach and should know the domain and the level of the experience of absolute disarray. It is a level at which anguish is already a protection, not so much *Abwarten* as *Erwartung*. Anguish develops by letting a danger appear, whereas there is no danger at the level of the final experience of *Hilflosigkeit*.

I have already told you how the limit of this region is expressed for man; it touches the end of what he is and what he is not. That is why the myth of Oedipus acquires its full significance here.

2

Today I will once again bring you back to the passage through that intermediary region, and I remind you that in the Oedipus story one must not overlook the time that passes between the moment when Oedipus is blinded and the moment when he dies. And it is, moreover, a special, unique death that, as I have already said, constitutes a genuine enigma in Sophocles.

One shouldn't forget that in a sense Oedipus did not suffer from the Oedipus complex, and he punished himself for a sin he did not commit. He simply killed a man whom he didn't know was his father, a man whom, according to the realistically motivated form in which the myth is presented, he met on the road along which he was fleeing because he had got wind of something quite unpleasant concerning him with relation to his father. He flees those whom he thinks are his parents, and commits a crime in trying to avoid it.

He doesn't know that in achieving happiness, both conjugal happiness and that of his job as king, of being the guide to the happiness of the state, he is sleeping with his mother. One might therefore ask what the treatment he inflicts on himself means. Which treatment? He gives up the very thing that captivated him. In fact, he has been duped, tricked by reason of the fact that he achieved happiness. Beyond the sphere of the service of gods and in spite of the complete success of this service, he enters into the zone in which he pursues his desire.

Note carefully the dispositions he makes; at the moment of death, he remains unmoved. The irony of the French expression for hale and hearty, *bon pied bon oeil*,¹ should not mean too much in his case, since the man whose feet are swollen has also lost the sight of his eyes. But that doesn't prevent him from demanding everything or, in other words, all the honors due his rank. The

¹ It means literally "good foot good eye."

memory of the legend allows us to perceive something that is emphasized by modern ethnography, because after the sacrifice he was sent the victim's thigh instead of its shoulder – it might be the other way round – and he sees in this lapse an intolerable insult and breaks with his sons to whom he had handed over power. Then in the end his curse on his sons bursts forth, and it is absolute.

It is important to explore what is contained in that moment when, although he has renounced the service of goods, nothing of the preeminence of his dignity in relation to these same goods is ever abandoned; it is the same moment when in his tragic liberty he has to deal with the consequence of that desire that led him to go beyond the limit, namely, the desire to know. He has learned and still wants to learn something more.

In order to make myself understood, I should perhaps evoke another tragic figure, one who is no doubt closer to us – King Lear.

I cannot give a detailed analysis of the significance of the play here. I just wanted to make you understand what Oedipus's crossing over means on the basis of *King Lear*, where we find that crossing over in a derisory form.

King Lear, too, gives up the service of goods, gives up his royal duties; the old fool believes he is lovable and, therefore, hands over the service of goods to his daughters. But you must not assume that he gives up anything. It's supposed to be the beginning of freedom, a life of festivities with his fifty knights, lots of fun, during which time he stays in turn with each of those two shrews whom he thought he could entrust with the duties of power.

In the meantime, there he is with no other warrant than that of loyalty, of an agreement founded on honor, since he conceded the power he had of his own free will. Shakespeare's formidable irony mobilizes a whole swarm of destinies that devour each other, for it isn't just Lear but all the good people in the play whom we see condemned to suffering without remission for having trusted to simple loyalty and to agreements founded on honor. I don't have to emphasize the fact; just read the play again.

Lear as well as Oedipus shows us that he who enters that space, whether it be by the derisory path of Lear or the tragic one of Oedipus, finds himself alone and betrayed.

Oedipus's last word is, as you know, that phrase *μη φύναι* which I have repeated here any number of times, since it embodies a whole exegesis on negation. I indicated to you how the French language raises it in that little pleonastic "ne" which no one knows what to do with, since it dangles there in an expression such as "je crains qu'il ne vienne" ("I'm afraid he is coming"), which would be just as pleased if it weren't there like a particle oscillating between a coming and fear of it.² It has no *raison d'être* except for that

² See note 2 on p. 64 on the pleonastic "ne."

of the subject itself. In French it is the remains of that which means $\mu\eta$ in Greek, a word that does not signify a negation. I could show it to you in any text.

Other texts give expression to it, such as *Antigone*, for example, in the passage where the guard, in speaking about the person whom he does not yet know to be Antigone, says: "He left without leaving a trace." And the guard adds in the lesson chosen by the editor: "ἔφηνγε μὴ εἰδέναι." In principle that means he avoided its being known that it was him – τό μὴ εἰδέναι – as a variant suggests. But if one took the first version with its two negations literally, one would have to say he avoided its not being known that it was him. The $\mu\eta$ is there to indicate the *Spaltung* between the enunciation and the enunciated that I have already explained. Μή φύναι means "rather not to be."

That's the choice with which a human existence such as Oedipus's has to end. It ends so perfectly that he doesn't die like everybody else, that is to say accidentally; he dies from a true death in which he erases his own being. The malediction is freely accepted on the basis of the true subsistence of a human being, the subsistence of the subtraction of himself from the order of the world. It's a beautiful attitude, and as the madrigal says, it's twice as beautiful on account of its beauty.

Oedipus shows us where the inner limit zone in the relationship to desire ends. In every human experience that zone is always relegated to a point beyond death, since the ordinary human being conducts himself in the light of what needs to be done so as not to risk the other death, the death that simply involves kicking the bucket. *Primum vivere* – questions relating to being are always postponed to later, which does not, of course, mean that they aren't there on the horizon.

Here then are the topological notions without which it is our experience that it is impossible to find one's way or to say anything that is not simply confusing and a going round in circles – and that's true of even the most eminent of authors. Take, for example, the article by Jones that is remarkable in all kinds of ways, "Hatred, Culpability and Fear," in which he shows the circularity of these terms, though it's not an absolute one. I beg you to study it pen in hand, for we will be dealing with it next year. You will see how many things would be illuminated if the principles we are articulating were applied.

Let us take up those principles again in connection with the common man who concerns us here; let us try to see what they imply. Jones, for example, has perhaps expressed better than others the moral alibi that he called *moralisches Entgegenkommen*, that is, a kind of consent to the moral demand. In effect, he shows that very often there is nothing more in the duties man imposes on himself than the fear of the risks involved in failing to impose

those duties. One should call things by their name, and it's not because one hangs up a triple analytical veil that it doesn't mean what it says: psychoanalysis teaches that in the end it is easier to accept interdiction than to run the risk of castration.

Let's try to practice a little brain-washing on ourselves. Before going into the question further, which is often a way of avoiding it, what does it mean to say, as Freud does, that the superego appears at the moment of the decline of the Oedipus complex? Of course, we have in the meantime made a little progress by demonstrating that one was born before, in reaction to sadistic drives, according to Melanie Klein, although no one has been able to prove that the same superego is involved. But let's limit ourselves to the Oedipal superego. The fact that it is born at the moment of the decline of the Oedipus complex means that the subject incorporates its authority into himself.

That ought to put you on the right track. In a famous article called "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud also says that the work of mourning is applied to an incorporated object, to an object which for one reason or another one is not particularly fond of. As far as the loved object that we make such a fuss about in our mourning is concerned, we do not, in fact, simply sing its praises, if only because of the lousy trick it played on us by leaving us. Thus, if we are sufficiently cruel to ourselves to incorporate the father, it is perhaps because we have a lot to reproach this father with.

It is here that the distinctions I presented to you last year may prove useful. Castration, frustration, and privation are not the same thing. If frustration properly belongs to the symbolic mother, he who is responsible for castration, according to Freud, is the real father, and as far as privation is concerned, it's the imaginary father. Let us try to understand the function of each of these elements at the moment of decline of the Oedipus complex and of the formation of the superego. Perhaps that will shed a little light, and we won't have the impression of reading two different lines at the same time when we take account of the castrating father, on the one hand, and the father as origin of the superego, on the other. This distinction is basic to everything Freud articulated, and in particular to the question of castration once he began to spell it out – the phenomenon is indeed a stupefying one since it is a notion that had never even been broached before him.

The real father, Freud tells us, is a castrating father. In what way? Through his presence as real father who effectively occupies that person with whom the child is in a state of rivalry, namely, the mother. Whether or not that is the case in experience, in theory there is no doubt about it: the real father is elevated to the rank of Great Fucker – though not, believe me, in the face of the Eternal, which isn't even around to count the number of times. Yet doesn't this real and mythical father fade at the moment of the decline of the Oedipus complex into the one whom the child may easily have already discovered at

the relatively advanced age of five years old, namely, the imaginary father, the father who has fucked the kid up.

Isn't that what the theoreticians of analytical experience say as they mumble away? And doesn't one find the point of difference there? Isn't it in connection with the experience of privation the small child undergoes – not because he is small but because he is human – in connection with what the child experiences as privation, that the mourning for the imaginary father is forged? – that is a mourning for someone who would really be someone. The perpetual reproach that is born at that moment, in a way that is more or less definitive and well-formed depending on the individual case, remains fundamental in the structure of the subject. It is this imaginary father and not the real one which is the basis of the providential image of God. And the function of the superego in the end, from its final point of view, is hatred for God, the reproach that God has handled things so badly.

I believe that that is the true structure of the articulation of the Oedipus complex. If you break it down in that way, you will find that the detours, hesitations, and gropings of different authors in their attempts to explain various difficulties and details will be much clearer. In particular, you will also be able to see, in a way that is otherwise impossible, what Jones really means when he speaks of the relationship between hate, fear, and guilt in connection with the genesis of the superego.

3

To pick up the thread, let us say, would to God that the drama took place at the bloody level of castration and that the poor little man flooded the whole world with his blood like Kronos Uranus!

Everyone knows that castration is there on the horizon and that it never, of course, occurs. What does happen relates to the fact that the little man is rather a paltry support for that organ, for that signifier, and that he seems rather to be deprived of it. And here one can see that his fate is common to that of the little girl, who also can be explained much more clearly from this angle of vision.

What is in question is the moment when the subject quite simply perceives that his father is an idiot or a thief, as the case may be, or quite simply a weakling or, routinely, an old fogey, as in Freud's case. He was if you like an agreeable and kind old fogey, but he must, like all fathers, have communicated in spite of himself the series of shocks we call the contradictions of capitalism; he left Freiberg where there was nothing to do anymore in order to move to Vienna, and it is the kind of thing that doesn't go unnoticed in the mind of a child, even if he is only three years old. And it was because Freud loved his father that he felt obliged to restore his stature to the point

of attributing to him the gigantic proportions of the father of the primitive horde.

But that's not what resolves the fundamental questions; that's not the essential question, as the story of Oedipus tells us. If Oedipus is a whole man, if Oedipus doesn't have an Oedipus complex, it is because in his case there is no father at all. The person who served as father was his adoptive father. And, my good friends, that's the case with all of us, because as the Latin has it, *pater is est quem justae nuptiae demonstrant*, that is to say, the father is he who acknowledges us. We are at bottom in the same boat as Oedipus, even if we don't know it. As far as the father that Oedipus knew is concerned, he only becomes the father, as Freud's myth indicates, once he is dead.

It is thus there, as I've said a hundred times, that one finds the paternal function. In our theory the sole function of the father is to be a myth, to be always only the Name-of-the-Father, or in other words nothing more than the dead father, as Freud explains in *Totem and Taboo*. But for this to be developed fully, of course, the human adventure has to be carried through to its end, if only in outline; that zone Oedipus enters after having scratched out his eyes has to be explored.

It is always through some beneficial crossing of the limit that man experiences his desire. Others have expressed the idea before me. The whole meaning Jones discovers in connection with aphanisis is related to this; it is linked to the important risk, which is quite simply the loss of desire. Oedipus's desire is the desire to know the last word on desire.

When I tell you that the desire of man is the desire of the Other, I am reminded of something in a poem by Paul Eluard that says "the difficult desire to endure" (*le dur désir de durer*). That is nothing more than the desire to desire.

For the ordinary man, given that Oedipus's mourning is at the origin of the superego, the double limit – from the real death risked to the preferred or the assumed death, to the being-for-death – only appears as veiled. It is a veil that Jones calls hate. You can grasp in this the reason why any alert author locates the final term of the psychic reality we deal with in the ambivalence between love and hate.

The external limit that keeps man in the service of the good is the *primum vivere*. It is fear, we are told, but you can see how superficial its influence is.

Between the two for the ordinary man lies the exercise of his guilt, which is a reflection of his hatred for the creator, whoever he may be – for man is creationist – who made him such a weak and inadequate creature.

All this nonsense is meaningless for the hero, for the one who has entered that zone, for Oedipus who goes as far as the *μηφύναι* of true being-for-death, goes as far as a malediction he acquiesces in or an engagement with

annihilation that is taken to be the realization of his wish. There is nothing else here except the true and indivisible disappearance that is his. Entry into that zone for him is constituted of a renunciation of goods and of power that is supposed to be a punishment, but is not, in fact, one. If he tears himself free from the world through the act of blinding himself, it is because only he who escapes from appearances can achieve truth. This was known in antiquity; the great Homer was blind and so was Tiresias.

For Oedipus the absolute reign of his desire is played out between the two, something that is sufficiently brought out by the fact that he is shown to be unyielding right to the end, demanding everything, giving up nothing, absolutely unreconciled.

I showed you the reverse and derisory side of this topology, which is the topology of tragedy, in connection with poor Lear, who doesn't understand a thing and who makes the ocean and the earth echo because he tried to enter the same region in a salutary way with everyone agreeing. He appears in the end as still not having understood a thing and holding dead in his arms the object of his love, who is, of course, misrecognized by him.

Thus defined, that region enables us to posit the limits that illuminate a certain number of problems that are raised by our theory and our experience. We have never stopped repeating that the interiorization of the Law has nothing to do with the Law. Although we still need to know why. It is possible that the superego serves as a support for the moral conscience, but everyone knows that it has nothing to do with the moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned. What the superego demands has nothing to do with that which we would be right in making the universal rule of our actions; such is the ABC of psychoanalytic truth. But it is not enough to affirm the fact; it must be justified.

I believe that the schema I have proposed to you is capable of doing that, and that if you stick with it you will find a way of not getting lost in that labyrinth.

Next time, I will start out on the path that all this has been leading to – a more precise grasp of catharsis and of the consequences of man's relationship to desire.

June 29, 1960

XXIV

The paradoxes of ethics *or* Have you acted in conformity with your desire?

THE COMIC DIMENSION
THE FABLE OF THE CASH REGISTER
DESIRE AND GUILT
GIVING GROUND RELATIVE TO ONE'S DESIRE
RELIGION, SCIENCE AND DESIRE

We come now to our final talk.

By way of conclusion I propose to make a certain number of comments, some of which are conclusive and others experiential or suggestive. You will not be surprised, for we haven't brought our discussion to a close, and it's not easy to find a medium when one has to conclude on a subject that is by its very nature excentric. Let's say that today I am proposing "a mixed grill."¹

1

Since one should always start up again with a definition, let's say that an ethics essentially consists in a judgment of our action, with the proviso that it is only significant if the action implied by it also contains within it, or is supposed to contain, a judgment, even if it is only implicit. The presence of judgment on both sides is essential to the structure.

If there is an ethics of psychoanalysis – the question is an open one – it is to the extent that analysis in some way or other, no matter how minimally, offers something that is presented as a measure of our action – or it at least claims to. At first sight the idea may occur to someone that it offers a return to our instincts as the measure of our action. Such seems to belong to a time long past, but there are perhaps those here and there whom that prospect frightens. I have even had someone raising objections of that kind to me in a

¹ In English in the original.

philosophical society, objections that I thought had disappeared over forty years ago. But it is true to say that by now everyone has been sufficiently reassured on that topic; nobody seems to fear a moral cleansing of that kind as the result of an analysis.

I have often shown you that in, so to speak, constructing the instincts, in making them the natural law of the realization of harmony, psychoanalysis takes on the guise of a rather disturbing alibi, of a moralizing hustle or a bluff, whose dangers cannot be exaggerated. That's a commonplace as far as you are concerned, and I won't pursue it.

To limit ourselves to something that can be said right off, that everyone has known for a long time now, and that is one of the most modest features of our practice, let us say that analysis progresses by means of a return to the meaning of an action. That alone justifies the fact that we are interested in the moral dimension. Freud's hypothesis relative to the unconscious presupposes that, whether it be healthy or sick, normal or morbid, human action has a hidden meaning that one can have access to. In such a context the notion of a catharsis that is a purification, a decantation or isolation of levels, is immediately conceivable.

That hardly seems to me to qualify as a discovery; rather, it is the minimal position that is fortunately not too obscured in the common notion of psychoanalysis: in what goes on at the level of lived experience there is a deeper meaning that guides that experience, and one can have access to it. Moreover, things cannot be the same when the two layers are separated.

That doesn't take us very far. It is the embryonic form of a very old *γνώθι σεαυτόν*, though it obviously has its own particular emphasis, which is related to an excessively general form of all that goes under the name of inner progress. But it is already enough to situate the sharp difference I have emphasized this year that is introduced, if not by analytical experience, then at least by Freudian thought.

What does this difference consist of? It may be measured in the response given to the question that ordinary people ask themselves, a question that we answer more or less directly. The question is, once it is over, once the return to the meaning of an action has been accomplished, once the deep meaning has been liberated – that is to say, separated out through a catharsis in the sense of decantation – will everything work out all right by itself? Or, to be precise, will there be nothing but goodness?

That takes us back to a very old question. A certain Mencius, as he was called by the Jesuits, tells us that it can be judged in the following way. In the beginning, goodness was natural to man; it was like a mountain covered with trees. Only the inhabitants of the surrounding area started to cut the trees down. The blessing of the night was that it gave rise to a fresh growth of suckers, but in the morning the herds returned to eat them and in the end the mountain was denuded, so that nothing grew on it.

You see that the problem is not a new one, then. The goodness in question is so far from being confirmed in our experience that we start out from what is modestly called the negative therapeutic reaction, something that at the more remarkable level of literary generality I last time called a malediction assumed or agreed to in the *μή φύναι* of Oedipus. Not that the problem doesn't remain whole; that is decided beyond the return to sense.

I asked you this year to enter into a mental experiment, an *experimentum mentis* as Galileo called it – contrary to what you may think he was much better acquainted with mental experiments than with those of the laboratory, and without it in any case he would certainly not have taken the decisive step. The *experimentum mentis* that I have been proposing to you throughout the year is directly connected to something that our experience points to whenever we try to articulate it in its own topology, in its own structure, instead of reducing it to a common denominator or common standard, instead of making it fit into preexisting pigeon-holes. The experiment consisted in adopting what I called the point of view of the Last Judgment. And I mean by that choosing as the standard of that reconsideration of ethics to which psychoanalysis leads us, the relationship between action and the desire that inhabits it.

To make you understand this relationship, I had recourse to tragedy, that is to a reference one cannot avoid, as is proved by the fact that Freud was obliged to make use of it from the beginning. The ethics of psychoanalysis has nothing to do with speculation about prescriptions for, or the regulation of, what I have called the service of goods. Properly speaking, that ethics implies the dimension that is expressed in what we call the tragic sense of life.

Actions are inscribed in the space of tragedy, and it is with relation to this space, too, that we are led to take our bearings in the sphere of values. Moreover, this is also true of the space of comedy, and when I started to talk to you about the formations of the unconscious, it was, as you know, the comic that I had in mind.

Let us say by way of a preliminary sounding that the relationship between action and the desire which inhabits it in the space of tragedy functions in the direction of a triumph of death. And I taught you to rectify the notion as a triumph of being-for-death that is formulated in Oedipus's *μή φύναι*, a phrase in which one finds that *μή*, the negation that is identical to the entrance of the subject supported by the signifier. There lies the fundamental character of all tragic action.

A preliminary sounding of the space of comedy shows it is less a question of a triumph than of a futile or derisory play of vision. However little time I have thus far devoted to the comic here, you have been able to see that there, too, it is a question of the relationship between action and desire, and of the former's fundamental failure to catch up with the latter.

The sphere of comedy is created by the presence at its center of a hidden signifier, but that in the Old Comedy is there in person, namely, the phallus. Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away? One must simply remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate it in its full human dimension, not excluding the unconscious, is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, including precisely those that are the most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier.

The phallus is nothing more than a signifier, the signifier of this flight. Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives.

The pathetic side of this dimension is, you see, exactly the opposite, the counterpart of tragedy. They are not incompatible, since tragi-comedy exists. That is where the experience of human action resides. And it is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience, that a reconsideration of ethics is possible, that a form of ethical judgment is possible, of a kind that gives this question the force of a Last Judgment: Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?

This is not an easy question to sustain. I, in fact, claim that it has never been posed with that purity elsewhere, and that it can only be posed in the analytical context.

Opposed to this pole of desire is traditional ethics – not completely, of course, for nothing is new, or everything is new, in human thought. That's something I wanted to make you feel by choosing the example of the antithesis of the tragic hero in a tragedy, an antithesis who nevertheless embodies a certain heroic quality, and that is Creon. With reference to this example, I spoke to you of the service of goods that is the position of traditional ethics. The cleaning up of desire, modesty, temperateness, that is to say, the middle path we see articulated so remarkably in Aristotle; we need to know what it takes the measure of and whether its measure is founded on something.

An attentive examination shows that its measure is always marked with a deep ambiguity. In the end the order of things on which it claims to be founded is the order of power, of a human – far too human – power. We are not the ones to say so, but it is obvious that it can hardly take two steps in expressing itself without sketching in the ramparts that surround the place where, as far as we are concerned, the signifiers are unleashed or where, for Aristotle, the arbitrary rule of the gods holds sway – insofar as at this level gods and beasts join together to signify the world of the unthinkable.

The gods? We don't mean by that the prime mover, but mythological gods. We, of course, know how to contain the unleashing of the signifiers, but it is not because we have staked almost everything on the No/Name-of-the-Father

that the question is simplified. If you go and take a close look at it – and it's worth the trouble – you will see that Aristotle's morality is wholly founded on an order that is no doubt a tidied-up, ideal order. But it is nevertheless one that corresponds to the politics of his time, to the organization of the city. His morality is the morality of the master, created for the virtues of the master and linked to the order of powers. One shouldn't be contemptuous of the order of powers – these are not the comments of an anarchist – one simply needs to know their limit with relation to our field of inquiry.

As far as that which is of interest to us, namely, that which has to do with desire, to its array and disarray, so to speak, the position of power of any kind in all circumstances and in every case, whether historical or not, has always been the same.

What is Alexander's proclamation when he arrived in Persepolis or Hitler's when he arrived in Paris? The preamble isn't important: "I have come to liberate you from this or that." The essential point is "Carry on working. Work must go on." Which, of course, means: "Let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire."

The morality of power, of the service of goods, is as follows: "As far as desires are concerned, come back later. Make them wait."

2

It is worth recalling here the line of demarcation with reference to which the question of ethics is raised for us. It is also a line that marks an essential end in the development of philosophy.

Kant is the person I have in mind because he renders us the greatest service by introducing the topological milestone that distinguishes the moral phenomenon. And by that I mean the field that is of interest to moral judgment as such. It is a limited categorical opposition no doubt, purely ideal, but it was essential that someone someday articulate it by purifying it – catharsis – of all interest, which does not mean of the interests linked to mental pathology, to the *pathologisches*, but simply to sensible, vital human interests. For it to be valorized as the properly ethical field, none of our interests must be in any way involved.

A decisive step is taken there. Traditional morality concerned itself with what one was supposed to do "insofar as it is possible," as we say, and as we are forced to say. What needs to be unmasked here is the point on which that morality turns. And that is nothing less than the impossibility in which we recognize the topology of our desire. The breakthrough is achieved by Kant when he posits that the moral imperative is not concerned with what may or may not be done. To the extent that it imposes the necessity of a practical reason, obligation affirms an unconditional "Thou shalt." The importance of

this field derives from the void that the strict application of the Kantian definition leaves there.

Now we analysts are able to recognize that place as the place occupied by desire. Our experience gives rise to a reversal that locates in the center an incommensurable measure, an infinite measure, that is called desire. I showed you how one can easily substitute for Kant's "Thou shalt" the Sadean fantasm of *jouissance* elevated to the level of an imperative – it is, of course, a pure and almost derisory fantasm, but it doesn't exclude the possibility of its being elevated to a universal law.

Let us stop here and look at the prospects on the horizon. If Kant had only designated this crucial point for us, everything would be fine, but one also sees that which the horizon of practical reason opens onto: to the respect and the admiration that the starry heavens above and the moral law within inspires in him. One may wonder why. Respect and admiration suggest a personal relationship. That is where everything subsists in Kant, though in a demystified form. And that is where my comments on the basis furnished by analytical experience relative to the dimension of the subject in the signifier are essential. Let me illustrate this briefly.

Kant claims to find a new proof of the immortality of the soul in the fact that nothing on earth satisfies the demands of moral action. It is because the soul remains hungry for something more that it needs an afterlife, so that the unrealized harmony may be achieved somewhere or other.

What does that mean? That respect and that admiration for the starry skies had already grown fragile at that moment in history. Did they still exist in Kant's time? As far as we are concerned, when we look at the vast universe, doesn't it seem to us that we are in the middle of a huge construction site surrounded by various nebulae with one funny little corner, the one we live in, that has always been compared to a watch that someone forgot? Apart from that, it is easy to see if there is no one there, if, that is, we give a meaning to what might be construed as a presence. And there is no other articulatable meaning to give this divine presence except that which functions for us as a criterion of the subject, namely, the dimension of the signifier.

The philosophers can speculate all they want on the Being in whom act and knowledge are one, the religious tradition is not misled: only that which can be articulated by means of a revelation has the right to be recognized as one or more divine persons. As for us, only one thing could convince us that the heavens are inhabited by a transcendent person and that is a signal. What signal? Not the one that defines the theory of communication, which spends its time telling us that one can interpret the warning rays that traverse space in terms of signs. Distance creates mirages. Because these things come from far off, people believe that they are messages we are receiving from stars three hundred light-years away. But they are no more messages than when we look

in a bottle. It would only be a message if some explosion of a star at these immense distances corresponded to something that was written down somewhere in the Great Book – in other words, something that would make a reality of what was happening.

Some of you recently saw a film that didn't exactly excite me, but since then I have revised my impression, for there are some interesting details. It's Jules Dassin's film, *Never on Sunday*. The character who is presented to us as marvelously at one with the immediacy of his supposedly primitive feelings, in a small bar in Piraeus, starts to beat up those who are sitting around because they haven't been speaking properly, that is to say in conformity with moral norms. On other occasions, in order to express his immense excitement and his happiness, he picks up a glass and shatters it on the ground. And every time a glass is shattered, we see the cash register vibrate frenetically. I see that as a beautiful touch, a stroke of genius. That cash register defines very clearly the structure that concerns us.

The reason why there is human desire, that the field can exist, depends on the assumption that everything real that happens may be accounted for somewhere. Kant managed to reduce the essence of the moral field to something pure; nevertheless, there remains at its center the need for a space where accounts are kept. It is this that is signified by the horizon represented by his immortality of the soul. As if we hadn't been plagued enough by desire on earth, part of eternity is to be given over to keeping accounts. In these fantasies one finds projected nothing but the structural relationship that I attempted to indicate on the graph with the line of the signifier. It is insofar as the subject is situated and is constituted with relation to the signifier that the break, splitting or ambivalence is produced in him at the point where the tension of desire is located.

The film I just referred to, in which I learned afterwards the director, Dassin, plays the role of the American, presents us with a nice and curious model of something that can be expressed as follows from a structural point of view. The character who plays the satirical role, the role that is offered for our derision, namely, Dassin as the American, finds himself to be as the producer and creator of the film in a position that is more American than those whom he makes fun of, that is, the Americans.

Don't misunderstand me. He is there in order to undertake the reeducation of a good-hearted whore. And the irony of the screenwriter is to be found in the fact that in carrying out this pious mission he is in the pay of the one whom we might call the Grand Master of the brothel. The deeper meaning is signaled to us by the placing before our eyes of an enormous pair of black glasses – he is someone whose face is for good reason never shown. Naturally, when the whore learns that it is the character who is her sworn enemy who is paying the piper, she eviscerates the beautiful soul of the American in

question, and he who has conceived such great hopes is made to look very foolish.

If there is a dimension of social criticism in this symbolism – that it to say that what one finds hidden behind the brothel are the forces of order, so to speak – it is somewhat naive to make us hope at the end of the screenplay that all that is needed to solve the problem of the relations between virtue and desire is to close down the brothel. There runs constantly throughout the film that old *fin de siècle* ambiguity, which involves identifying classical antiquity with the sphere of liberated desire. It is not to have gone beyond Pierre Louÿs to believe that it is somewhere outside her own situation that the good Athenian prostitute can focus all the light of the mirages she is at the center of. In a word, Dassin didn't have to confuse what flows from the sight of this attractive figure with a return to Aristotelian morality, which he fortunately doesn't spell out in detail.

Let's get back on track. This shows us that on the far edge of guilt, insofar as it occupies the field of desire, there are the bonds of a permanent book-keeping, and this is so independently of any particular articulation that may be given of it.

Part of the world has resolutely turned in the direction of the service of goods, thereby rejecting everything that has to do with the relationship of man to desire – it is what is known as the postrevolutionary perspective. The only thing to be said is that people don't seem to have realized that, by formulating things in this way, one is simply perpetuating the eternal tradition of power, namely, "Let's keep on working, and as far as desire is concerned, come back later." But what does it matter? In this tradition the communist future is only different from Creon's, from that of the city, in assuming – and it's not negligible – that the sphere of goods to which we must all devote ourselves may at some point embrace the whole universe.

In other words, this operation is only justified insofar as the universal State is on the horizon. Yet nothing indicates that even at that limit the problem will disappear, since it will persist in the consciousness of those who live with that view of things. Either they imply that the properly stated values of the State will disappear, that is organization and policing, or they introduce a term such as the universal concrete State, which means no more than supposing things will change on a molecular level, at the level of the relationship that constitutes the position of man in the face of various goods, to the extent that up till now his desire was not there.

Whatever happens to that point of view, nothing is structurally changed. The sign of this is, first, that, although the divine presence of an orthodox kind is absent, the keeping of accounts certainly is not and, second, that for the inexhaustible dimension that necessitates the immortality of the soul for Kant, there is substituted the notion of objective guilt, which is precisely

articulated as such. From a structural point of view in any case, nothing is resolved.

I think I have now sufficiently outlined the opposition between the desiring center and the service of goods. We can now come to the heart of the matter.

3

It is in an experimental form that I advance the following propositions here. Let's formulate them as paradoxes. Let's see what they sound like to analysts' ears.

I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire.

Whether it is admissible or not in a given ethics, that proposition expresses quite well something that we observe in our experience. In the last analysis, what a subject really feels guilty about when he manifests guilt at bottom always has to do with – whether or not it is admissible for a director of conscience – the extent to which he has given ground relative to his desire.

Let's take this further. He has often given ground relative to his desire for a good motive or even for the best of motives. And this shouldn't astonish us. For guilt has existed for a very long time, and it was noticed long ago that the question of a good motive, of a good intention, although it constitutes certain zones of historical experience and was at the forefront of discussions of moral theology in, say, the time of Abelard, hasn't enlightened people very much. The question that keeps reappearing in the distance is always the same. And that is why Christians in their most routine observances are never at peace. For if one has to do things for the good, in practice one is always faced with the question: for the good of whom? From that point on, things are no longer obvious.

Doing things in the name of the good, and even more in the name of the good of the other, is something that is far from protecting us not only from guilt but also from all kinds of inner catastrophes. To be precise, it doesn't protect us from neurosis and its consequences. If analysis has a meaning, desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in a particular destiny, and that destiny demands insistently that the debt be paid, and desire keeps coming back, keeps returning, and situates us once again in a given track, the track of something that is specifically our business.

Last time I opposed the hero to the ordinary man, and someone was upset by that. I do not distinguish between them as if they were two different human species. In each of us the path of the hero is traced, and it is precisely as an ordinary man that one follows it to the end.

The fields that I sketched out last time – the inner circle to which I gave

the name being-for-death, in the midst of desires, renouncing entry into the external circle – are not in opposition to the triple field of hatred, guilt and fear as the ordinary man is in opposition to the hero. That's not the point at all. That general form is definitely traced by the structure in and for the ordinary man. And it is precisely to the extent that the hero guides himself correctly there that he experiences all the passions in which the ordinary man is entangled, except that in his case they are pure and he succeeds in supporting himself there fully.

Someone among you has baptized the topology that I have sketched out for you this year with the apt and somewhat humorous phrase, the zone between-two-deaths. Your vacation will give you the time to consider whether its rigor seems to you to be especially effective. I ask you to think it over.

In Sophocles you will encounter again the dance between Creon and Antigone. It is obvious that to the extent that his presence in the zone indicates that something is defined and liberated, the hero bears his partner into that zone along with him. At the end of *Antigone* Creon henceforth speaks loudly and clearly of himself as someone who is dead among the living, and this is because he has literally lost all other goods as a result of the affair. As a consequence of the tragic act, the hero frees his adversary too.

There is no reason to limit the exploration of this field simply to Antigone. Take the example of *Philoctetes*, where you will learn other aspects of the question, that is to say, that a hero doesn't have to be heroic to be a hero. Philoctetes isn't much of a man. He went off all excited and full of enthusiasm to die for his country on the shores of Troy, and he wasn't even wanted for that. He was dumped on an island because he smelled so bad. He spent ten years there consumed with hatred. The first fellow who comes looking for him, a nice young man called Neoptemes, cons him like a baby, and in the end he nevertheless goes off to the shores of Troy because Hercules appears as a *deus ex machina* to offer a solution to all his sufferings. This *deus ex machina* isn't nothing, but everybody has known for a long time that he simply serves as a frame and limit to tragedy, that we don't have to take any more account of it than we do of the supports that define the area of the stage.

What makes Philoctetes a hero? Nothing more than the fact that he remains fiercely committed to his hate right to the end, when the *deus ex machina* appears like the curtain falling. This reveals to us not only that he has been betrayed and he is aware that he has been betrayed, but also that he has been betrayed with impunity. This is emphasized in the play by the fact that Neoptemes, who is full of remorse because he betrayed the hero and thereby demonstrates his noble soul, comes to make proper amends and gives him back the bow that plays such an essential role in the tragic space of the play

– because it operates there like a subject that is spoken about and addressed. It is the space of the hero and for good reason.

What I call “giving ground relative to one’s desire” is always accompanied in the destiny of the subject by some betrayal – you will observe it in every case and should note its importance. Either the subject betrays his own way, betrays himself, and the result is significant for him, or, more simply, he tolerates the fact that someone with whom he has more or less vowed to do something betrays his hope and doesn’t do for him what their pact entailed – whatever that pact may be, fated or ill-fated, risky, shortsighted, or indeed a matter of rebellion or flight, it doesn’t matter.

Something is played out in betrayal if one tolerates it, if driven by the idea of the good – and by that I mean the good of the one who has just committed the act of betrayal – one gives ground to the point of giving up one’s own claims and says to oneself, “Well, if that’s how things are, we should abandon our position; neither of us is worth that much, and especially me, so we should just return to the common path.” You can be sure that what you find there is the structure of giving ground relative to one’s desire.

Once one has crossed that boundary where I combined in a single term contempt for the other and for oneself, there is no way back. It might be possible to do some repair work, but not to undo it. Isn’t that a fact of experience that demonstrates how psychoanalysis is capable of supplying a useful compass in the field of ethical guidance?

I have, therefore, articulated three propositions.

First, the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one’s desire.

Second, the definition of a hero: someone who may be betrayed with impunity.

Third, this is something that not everyone can achieve; it constitutes the difference between an ordinary man and a hero, and it is, therefore, more mysterious than one might think. For the ordinary man the betrayal that almost always occurs sends him back to the service of goods, but with the proviso that he will never again find that factor which restores a sense of direction to that service.

We come finally to the field of the service of goods; it exists, of course, and there is no question of denying that. But turning things around, I propose the following, and this is my fourth proposition: There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire – given that desire is understood here, as we have defined it elsewhere, as the metonymy of our being. The channel in which desire is located is not simply that of the modulation of the signifying chain, but that which flows beneath it as well; that is, properly speaking, what we are as well as what we are not, our being and

our non-being – that which is signified in an act passes from one signifier of the chain to another beneath all the significations.

I explained this last time with the metonymy of “eating the book” that no doubt just came to me, but if you examine it a little more closely, you will see that it is the most extreme of metonymies – something that shouldn’t surprise us on the part of Saint John, the man who placed the Word at the beginning. It really is a writer’s idea, and he was an incomparable one. But eating the book is, after all, something that confronts what Freud imprudently told us is not susceptible to substitution and displacement, namely, hunger, with something that isn’t really made to be eaten, a book. In eating the book we come into contact with what Freud means when he speaks of sublimation as a change of aim and not of object. That’s not immediately clear.

The hunger in question, sublimated hunger, falls in the space between the two, because it isn’t the book that fills our stomach. When I ate the book, I didn’t thereby become book any more than the book became flesh. The book became *me* so to speak. But in order for this operation to take place – and it takes place everyday – I definitely have to pay a price. Freud weighs this difference in a corner of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh.

That’s the object, the good, that one pays for the satisfaction of one’s desire. And that’s the point I wanted to lead you up to, so as to shed a little light on something that is essential and that isn’t seen enough.

It is, in effect, there that the religious operation lies, something that is always interesting for us to consider. That good which is sacrificed for desire – and you will note that that means the same thing as that desire which is lost for the good – that pound of flesh is precisely the thing that religion undertakes to recuperate. That’s the single trait which is common to all religions; it is coextensive with all religion, with the whole meaning of religion.

I can’t develop this further, but I will give you two applications that are as expressive as they are brief. In a religious service the flesh that is offered to God on the altar, the animal sacrifice or whatever, is consumed by the people of the religious community and usually simply by the priest; they are the ones who stuff themselves with it. The form is an exemplary one; but it is just as true of the saint, whose goal is, in effect, access to sublime desire and not at all his own desire, for the saint lives and pays for others. The essential element in saintliness resides in the fact that the saint consumes the price paid in the form of suffering at two extreme points: the classic point of the worst ironies relative to religious mystification, such as the priests’ little feast behind the altar, and the point of the last frontier of religious heroism as

well. There, too, we find the same phenomenon of recuperation.

It is in this respect that great religious work is distinguished from what goes on in an ethical form of catharsis, which may bring together things as apparently foreign to each other as psychoanalysis and the tragic spectacles of the Greeks. If we found our measure there, it is not without reason. Catharsis has the sense of purification of desire. Purification cannot be accomplished, as is clear if one simply reads Aristotle's sentence, unless one has at least established the crossing of its limits that we call fear and pity.

It is because the tragic *epos* doesn't leave the spectator in ignorance as to where the pole of desire is and shows that the access to desire necessitates crossing not only all fear but all pity, because the voice of the hero trembles before nothing, and especially not before the good of the other, because all this is experienced in the temporal unfolding of the story, that the subject learns a little more about the deepest level of himself than he knew before.

For anyone who goes to the *Théâtre-Français* or the Theater of Athens, it will last as long as it lasts. But if, in the end, Aristotle's formulations mean anything, it is that. One knows what it costs to go forward in a given direction, and if one doesn't go that way, one knows why. One can even sense that if, in one's accounts with one's desire, one isn't exactly in the clear, it is because one couldn't do any better, for that's not a path one can take without paying a price.

The spectator has his eyes opened to the fact that even for him who goes to the end of his desire, all is not a bed of roses. But he also has his eyes opened – and this is essential – to the value of prudence which stands in opposition to that, to the wholly relative value of beneficial reasons, attachments or pathological interests, as Mr. Kant says, that might keep him on that risky path.

I have given you there an almost prosaic interpretation of tragedy and its effects, and however vital its peaks may be, I am not happy to have reduced it to a level that might lead you to believe that what I take to be essential in catharsis is pacificatory. It may not be pacificatory for everybody. But it was the most direct way of reconciling what some have taken to be the moralizing face of tragedy with the fact that the lesson of tragedy in its essence is not at all moral in the ordinary sense of the word.

Of course, not every catharsis can be reduced to something as external as a topological demonstration. When it is a matter of the practices of those whom the Greeks called *μαινόμενοι*, those who go crazy through a trance, through religious experience, through passion or through anything else, the value of the catharsis presupposes that, in a way that is either more-or-less directed or wild, the subject enters into the zone described here, and that his return involves some gain that will be called possession or whatever – Plato doesn't hesitate to point this out in the cathartic procedures. There is a whole

range there, a spectrum of possibilities, that it would take a whole year to catalogue.

The important thing is to know where all that is to be located in the field whose limits I have outlined for you this year.

4

And now a word in conclusion.

The field that is ours by reason of the fact that we are exploring it is going to be in one way or another the object of a science. And, you are going to ask me, will this science of desire belong to the field of the human sciences?

Before leaving you this year, I would like to make my position on the subject very clear. I do not think, given the way that field is being laid out, and I assure you it is being done carefully, that it will amount to anything else but a systematic and fundamental misunderstanding of everything that has to do with the whole affair that I have been discussing here. The fields of inquiry that are being outlined as necessarily belonging to the human sciences have in my eyes no other function than to form a branch of the service of goods, which is no doubt advantageous though of limited value. Those fields are in other words a branch of the service of those powers that are more than a little precarious. In any case, implied here is a no less systematic misunderstanding of all the violent phenomena that reveal that the path of the triumph of goods in our world is not likely to be a smooth one.

In other words, in the phrase of one of the exceptional politicians who has functioned as a leader of France, Mazarin, politics is politics, but love always remains love.

As for the kind of science that might be situated in that place I have designated the place of desire, what can it be? Well, you don't have to look very far. As far as science is concerned, the kind that is presently occupying the place of desire is quite simply what we commonly call science, the kind that you see cantering gaily along and accomplishing all kinds of so-called physical conquests.

I think that throughout this historical period the desire of man, which has been felt, anesthetized, put to sleep by moralists, domesticated by educators, betrayed by the academies, has quite simply taken refuge or been repressed in that most subtle and blindest of passions, as the story of Oedipus shows, the passion for knowledge. That's the passion that is currently going great guns and is far from having said its last word.

One of the most amusing features of the history of science is to be found in the propaganda scientists and alchemists have addressed to the powers that be at a time when they were beginning to run out of steam. It went as follows: "Give us money; you don't realize that if you gave us a little money, we would

be able to put all kinds of machines, gadgets and contraptions at your service." How could the powers let themselves be taken in? The answer to the question is to be found in a certain breakdown of wisdom. It's a fact that they did let themselves be taken in, that science got its money, as a consequence of which we are left with this vengeance. It's a fascinating thing, but as far as those who are at the forefront of science are concerned, they are not without a keen consciousness of the fact that they have their backs against a wall of hate. They are themselves capsized by the turbulent swell of a heavy sense of guilt. But that isn't very important because it's not in truth an adventure that Mr. Oppenheimer's remorse can put an end to overnight. It is moreover there where the problem of desire will lie in the future.

The universal order has to deal with the problem of what it should do with that science in which something is going on whose nature escapes it. Science, which occupies the place of desire, can only be a science of desire in the form of an enormous question mark; and this is doubtless not without a structural cause. In other words, science is animated by some mysterious desire, but it doesn't know, any more than anything in the unconscious itself, what that desire means. The future will reveal it to us, and perhaps among those who by the grace of God have most recently eaten the book – I mean those who have written with their labors, indeed with their blood, the book of Western science. It, too, is an edible book.

I spoke about Mencius earlier. After having made the statements that you would be wrong to consider optimistic about the goodness of man, he explains very well that what we are most ignorant about is the laws that come to us from heaven, the same laws as Antigone's. His proof is absolutely rigorous, but it is too late for me to repeat it here. The laws of heaven in question are the laws of desire.

Of him who ate the book and the mystery within it, one can, in effect, ask the question: "Is he good, is he bad?" That question now seems unimportant. The important thing is not knowing whether man is good or bad in the beginning; the important thing is what will transpire once the book has been eaten.

July 6, 1960

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J.-A. Miller

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