

A Review of Perversion's Beyond: Life at the Edge of Knowledge by Torgeir Fjeld

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Abstract: Torgeir Fjeld's book, *Perversion's Beyond. Life at the Edge of Knowledge*, is a tour de force through Freudian and Lacanian theory. The book offers innovative interpretations of major works in world literature and is furthermore written in a lucid style that makes it attractive to the reader interested in philosophy, cultural theory and literature.

Key words: Torgeir Fjeld; *Perversion's Beyond. Life at the Edge of Knowledge*; Freudian; Lacanian

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Torgeir Fjeld initiates his discussion of perversion with a preface and an introduction on Plato, Freud and Lacan, highlighting Freud's pleasure principle and the ethical implications of that principle. The economy of pleasure involves maintaining desire the lowest possible level so as to avoid collision with and obstruction by the ego and the super-ego, thus escaping punishment. Freud's argument may be regarded as ethical in that an excess of pleasure and pleasure-oriented acts may harm others. A Freudian ethics based on this prerogative seems indirect and passive rather than actively directed at others to the purpose of creating

good. Creating good will eventually emerge in Freud's thought as sublimation of the basic life drive, easily diverted, indeed perverted or inverted as a death drive that includes an ominous will to destruct surfacing at sinister points in world history and culminating in Nazism. The wider application of the concept of perversion expands the concept, endowing it with new meaning, specifically anti-orthodox or heterodox, and a proclivity inherent in perversion that may take two directions as Fjeld interestingly argues. One direction is de Sade's Being in Wickedness where exceeding the Law is tantamount to not only pleasure but human experience at a higher level, an enhanced Happiness in Evil, according to de Sade. This form of excess would seem to be limited since it is a forceful, in fact an enforced reaction to the Law and to orthodox origins. The better solution, in the estimation of the present reviewer and presumably in the estimation of the author of the book reviewed here, is Alain Badiou's concept of the new man, an individual conceived as existing beyond origins, dogmas and myths, and hence beyond orthodoxy and perversion, understood as that which transgresses orthodoxy. Perversion's own "beyond" might entail a transcendence that erases reflection and mediation in Plato's sense, giving the individual direct access to the light of truth. Continuing that line of thought in Chapter 1 which concentrates on the Name of the Father, Fjeld presents Freud's analysis of Little Hans where the founder of psychoanalysis and the talking cure brilliantly shows that unlimited engagement in pleasure—and lack of restrictions in the obtaining of pleasure—is a kind of primal, infant source of perversion facilitated by the closeness to the mother and the absence of paternal interference. When the father steps in, prohibition occurs in the form of a symbolic castration of the male child. Symbolic castration becomes the origin of signification, language and the Law, according to Lacan. Analogous to the infant experience of unrestricted pleasure would be, from the perspective of post-Freudian theory, lesbian relations that evade and outright nullify the Father. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that the 'pervert' claims direct access to the "big Other," a universal, transcendent Other, and Fjeld provides examples from literature, a.o. Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Hamsun's *Pan*, where leading characters may be said to experience such a direct access. The obverse is true of the position of the human body in a high-technological age interfering with the power and authenticity of the body. In the opinion of this reviewer Freudian and post-Freudian theory remains steeped in a materialistic perspective that omits mind and the spiritually motivated drive to the Beyond, entangling itself in a discourse that mirrors the material-technological age it purports to criticize. Lacan's contrived pun *père-vert* provides no help in this critical predicament.

In Chapter 2 of his book, *Knight time: literary perversions*, Fjeld opens his discussion by referring to Heidegger's concept of *damon*, inspired by Heraclitus. *Damon* is the coming man as the essence of a Being already there and set to unfold itself in the future. Two opposing concepts of time are involved, circular time and linear time, one typical of the agrarian society, the other characteristic of the industrial age. Heidegger's concept of time "*pure self-affectation*" and his concept of being as "*the essence of concerning-itself*" are related to the self being positioned in language and oriented towards the Other, as Fjeld argues. He provides three examples from world literature to illustrate his thesis that the essence of the new man is a re-capitulation of what was always there, following Heidegger, but that this re-capitulation is problematized by the literary protagonist's frustrated efforts to *become* in the sense of being the new man that was there originally. What is there from the beginning is both hidden and revealed. Revelation is obstructed by the protagonist's inability to disentangle himself from a dialectical determinism immersed in a fundamental dualism. This emerges as a problem in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. In Conrad's novella Kurtz is portrayed as a character escaping imperialism by turning more imperialistic than the imperialists, thus acting contrary to his initial purpose. His intention was to revert to cyclical time and to a primary darkness in an effort to oppose the linearity of an industrial, imperialistic age. Cervantes' epic presents a knight errant who evades the law of society by embracing the law of desire, escaping the prior law only by embodying the Law of the Other. Ibsen's play presents a character, Gregers Werle, whose purported quest for the truth is a distorted rebellion against his father, Old Werle. The truth of Old Werle's intimate involvement with the Ekdal household—he is the adolescent girl Hedvig's father—is disclosed as a fact secretly known to everyone. Gregers casts himself in the end, Fjeld argues, as a Judas, 13th at table, a victim sacrificing himself so as to bring about the advent of Christ, the disclosing of truth. Fjeld notes that "Hedvig has been bruised by the uncovering of deception" and that "she merely follows the order given to her." As a supplement to the interpretation offered by the author, outlined above, I would suggest that the protagonists of the three literary works are also subject to the rhetorical devices of comedy and irony, comedy being the primary characteristic of Cervantes' epic. Comedy unties the picaresque hero from his entanglement with the self-other dualism, liberating the text from the bondage imposed upon it by the dialectical opposition law of society/law of desire. The opposition seems to me to be dictated by a theoretical preconception that neglects significant literary strategies. Irony plays a profound role in Conrad's and Ibsen's

works, where it produces a metaphysics of *simultaneity* that disrupts the temporal axis, paving the way for a spatial dimension surpassing time. Simultaneity is the *beyond* that works through the rhetoric of irony and comedy, opening plot and character to the narrator's critique by viewing them from a sound distance. The narrator of Conrad's novella may be a disguised or implied author playing light and darkness out against one another and implicitly revealing the duality as a projection and a false historical notion. In Ibsen's drama the critique is voiced by the character Dr. Relling whose role is doubly ironic as he is both the subject of irony and the object of it, since he is secretly jealous of Old Werle. Relling's exposure of the "life-lie" is nevertheless valid as an ironic critique of the illusions that sustain the moral and mental life of the dramatic characters, with Hedvig as the sole exception. She breaks the illusion, or rather, reveals that the wild duck in the attic, a domesticated, acculturated substitute for true wildness, not only represents but embodies *truth and lie*. Heidegger's essay "On the Essence of Truth" puts forward the thesis that truth and lie are complicit and that the way to the truth is indirect, paved by lies that disclose the truth by a process of negativity.

In Chapter 3 Fjeld enlightens the reader with a thorough, well-thought out comment on Lacan's mirror stage, stating that Lacan's concept of the ego is fundamentally different from Freud's. Freud saw the ego as a permanent, universal entity whereas Lacan introduces a temporal aspect, claiming that the moment the six months to eighteen months old child sees its own specular image reflected in the mirror constitutes a particular stage in the history of the child's development. The fragmented self-perception and the disorder of the senses making up the child's psyche and body are unified in a totality in the mirror image which becomes not only a reflected image of the child's total self but a reflection of an outside, the Other as both integrated with the self and external to it. Lacan argues that at this point jealousy appears in the child's consciousness, in form of a feeling of being deprived, unloved, and wanting something that someone else has. One might say that the feeling of being fragmented, split, continues now, only at a higher level. The progression from Lacan's Imaginary through the Symbolic—the entry into language—and on to the Real is a progressive assimilation of a fragmented existence conducive to the ultimate knowledge of the Real as a state of contingency, interdependence, accident and continuous flux. The accidental, non-essential nature of the Real might have prompted Lacan to the conclusion that the Real already existed *as the surface of the mirror* which is there only as a reflecting surface. In itself it is empty. In the opinion of this reviewer this kind of speculative exercise would have brought Lacan closer to the insight and wisdom found in

Eastern metaphysics, i.e. that notions of ego, Self and Other may be discarded as simple illusions. The Real would then emerge as the vacant surface of the mirror which is the mind itself, empty of substantial content, reflecting only a coming and going and the incessant flux of subjects and objects. The separation of inside and outside is abolished and everything relegated to the 'outside' is finally seen as a projection from within. Fjeld's statement that the Other does not exist and that this cognition is conducive to an authentic self is a fair approximation to the idea of the vacant mirror.

"Clandestine jouissance" is the topic of Chapter 4 in Fjeld's work. The author opens his discussion by referring to Jacques Derrida's essay "Before the law" where the philosopher states that there is a law before the law of society and before the law of the Other. This prior law is located in a place where desirable acts coexist with undesirable acts. The issue of ethics is touched upon by Derrida but not resolved, in my opinion, and that is a problem. The idea that national culture is naturally imbued with an ethical consciousness guiding individuals and groups belonging to that culture is currently challenged, as we see, by the notion of another instance of the national, presumably supra-national and multicultural. The thinkers cited by Fjeld, a.o. Schirmacher, describe—in somewhat hazy terms in my opinion—the difference between culture and entertainment produced by the media and art, which according to Schirmacher can produce a "Dionysian process of perception excess." It is not clear to me what exactly this "perception excess" means and why Schirmacher chooses the term Dionysian to qualify it. The decisive factor in regard to art must be the relation between truth and fiction, the imagination and reality. How does a work of fiction and the imagination of the artist conceive and engender a truth or truths that are more real than so-called reality itself? The imagination is that "perception excess" that approximates knowledge *and* ethics at a distinctly higher and qualitatively different level than the technological media can attain. Schirmacher neglects to clarify how this process works and he also fails to explain how ethical worlds are "concealed," as cited by Fjeld. The ethical cannot be concealed. If it is, it is not the ethical. Furthermore, ethics is intimately related to knowledge since the ethical must be conceived as a heightening of subjective consciousness. Fjeld's discussion of the concepts of power and mastery in Heidegger and Foucault is a very lucid presentation of the relation between power and knowledge. The presentation makes it clear to me that Foucault's idea of the complicity between power and knowledge needs revising since knowledge is precisely that which exceeds power and destroys it. Further, the tie between ethics and knowledge is universal, global, for if it were not, the human world

would collapse. The trans-national institutions seem to me to fail when it comes to the integration of a national culture, complete with ethics, values and traditions, with the multicultural world of business corporations and advanced technological media. Fjeld cites Lacan as stating that the pervert is “a crusader for enjoyment,” and presumably such enjoyment is to be conceived as exceeding common ethics, as indeed it does in Nietzsche’s thought. At the same time, as Fjeld points out, the pervert is barred from “the space of desire” by the prohibiting Father. This creates a paradox so that the *jouissance* of the pervert is “clandestine.” The theorists and philosophers referred to by Fjeld do not offer a solution to this paradox. I do not pretend to possess a solution either but I would suggest that the question of the relation between aesthetics, ethics and knowledge needs to be clarified. One way to accomplish this is to recognize that the arts provide us with knowledge and with an ethical perspective that surpasses the enjoyment of the pervert.

In the final Chapter and the Afterword Fjeld discusses once again Lacan’s three stages, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The title of Chapter 5, “Beyond the fragment: community, ethics, illusions” promises to seek a solution to the existential, social and ethical problems originating in the *the drive of desire* which, from a Freudian and Lacanian point of view recurs with the force of an aggressive insistence. The Lacanian argument seems irrevocably immersed in a libido theory that threatens to undermine the ethical objective, in my opinion. Aristotle’s comments on the common good, cited by Fjeld, make for a classical formulation of engaging in the good as the only practical and reasonable thing to do. Governed by reason the human subject naturally chooses the good that lies beyond the narrow confines of the ego. The Freudian and Lacanian ego, by contrast, is in the midst of an intensive pursuit of satisfaction that obviates recognition of the good. The ego is posited in between a fragmented chaos and social participation, as Fjeld shows, vacillating between the desire to be reflected in the mirror as a total, unified self, and the desire to experience the chaos of drives and impulses that eventually re-emerge in the Real, an undifferentiated zone in itself characterized by chaos and fragmentation, located as it is beyond language and the social order. Lacan seems to me to be fixated on the ego and its inherent need to safeguard itself at all costs, which really comes down to feeding the ego. The Real is the extimate, as Fjeld points out, relating it to the Greek *ek-stasis*, standing outside, and *ecstasy* is the qualifying feature of *jouissance*. Here I detect an unwarranted invasion of ego psychology into epistemology that needs to be addressed. I am not comfortable with the distinction between inside and outside, being persuaded as I am that the boundary between the two is non-existing. Several clues in literature corroborate

this view, as for example Kafka's "The Burrow" and "Before the law," which Fjeld refers to. The gate barring the individual from access to the law on the other side is an illusion, a point Fjeld seems to concur with, and the logical consequence of this insight would be to view the gate as an imaginary bar separating inside from outside. The gate *qua* illusion magnifies the inside-outside division, producing a false valorization of what is on "the other side" and endowing the other side with an undue hue of glory, as we may observe time and time again in history where the tendency to glorify and worship takes a tragic turn when it results in religious or ideological warfare. Fanaticism is the sinister outcome of the inside-outside division. It is rampant in the world today. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotype falls into the same trap as it separates the past from the present and the future in a literary theory constructed to prove that the past is irretrievable. Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* disproves the theory as the past is retrieved in the present by being re-created and transformed in the here and now, a spatiotemporal movement we may observe in Kierkegaard's work *Repetition* also. The past lives on in an altered sense and is therefore not subject to the process of alienation that grips the ego as it enters language and the social order, as Lacan would have it. Theuth's gift of writing, rejected by the King, includes the gift of art, the value of aesthetics residing in the fact that it overcomes the boundaries ironically exposed in Kafka's stories. Fjeld's citation from Schopenhauer is singularly well chosen to illustrate the diminishing stature of individuality, understood as ego: "Your individuality is not your true and final being, indeed it is rather the mere expression of it."

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Work Cited

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