Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject
by Stephanie S. Swales

The author is one of the increasing number of younger, originally English-speaking practitioners or academics, educated in North America, who were supervised in their graduate studies, in depth and in detail, by Bruce Fink. He is a leading North American translator of Lacan into English, a writer of important theoretical and clinical chapters and books, explicating and exploring the implications of Lacan’s work, and a lively, valued participant in the group of late-Lacan and now post-Lacan students. Most of these supervisees, including Swales, have had some or substantial clinical experience, in a variety of settings in the United States. They write in a style that is similar to Fink’s and is very familiar to North Americans: clear, organized, straightforward, with the context clearly set and almost all of the thinking steps filled in. They also tend to have the virtue of being humble in their writing, careful about defining and explaining the terms they use, provisional in their claims, clearly open to more input, and enthusiastic and/or detailed in a way demonstrated by people who have come across Lacan and found him compatible with something in themselves. From an English-speaking reader’s point of view, these young writers are reader-friendly and inspiring.

Using Lacan’s structural distinctions to separate out his diagnostic groupings of neurosis, perverse, and psychosis, Swales is very specific about the diagnostic and etiological distinctions between those persons who are perverse and those who do the same illegal, non-consensual acts out of a neurotic structure. Having studied the literature and treated both kinds of patients for up to a year in a forensic out-patient setting, she is also specific about the differences in the treatment approaches—useful or not—in each type of individual. Further, her descriptions and discussions make an important overall contribution to the practice of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy influenced by the Lacanian orientation.

Many of the characteristics of the book on which I will comment are amply illustrated by a paragraph from her introduction:
In this book, I am privileging the later work of Lacan (1964–81) over his earlier work. This is for two main reasons. The first is that 1964 (Seminar XI) was the year that Lacan explained the two movements of the paternal metaphor, the operations of alienation and separation. These operations provide a useful framework not only for explaining the etiology of neurosis and perversion, but also for clearly differentiating between the two. Before that time, neither Freud nor Lacan had succeeded in elaborating a logically sound qualitative distinction between the two structures. The second main reason is that Lacan’s emphasis during that time period on the order of the real allowed him to arrive at more nuanced understandings of human suffering, structural positions, and the practice of psychoanalysis—understandings which take the unsayable into account. And perversion, even more so than neurosis, has to do with real order jouissance and its management. (pp. xv–xvi)

Throughout the book Swales interweaves current Freudian and Lacanian theories and their clinical implications, comparing and contrasting perverse with neurotic and psychotic symptoms and characters, and the contemporary professional literature and approaches to identifying and treating various kinds of sex-offenders. She emphasizes the contributions and certain advantages of the Lacanian approach. Given the detail and comprehensive nature of a book based on a doctoral dissertation, as this one is, a review such as this can only touch on a very few points that the author, herself, has already written about in better, much fuller language.

In the section on the history of the concept of perversion, she comes to the point that Foucault wrote, “commenting on the current discourses . . . ‘that [m]odern society is perverse . . . in actual fact’ … such that there are a considerable number of different things that turn people on, a kind of sexual mosaic” (p. 4). Verhaeghe (2001), a Belgian Lacanian analyst, called the current sexual norm the norm of informed consent, “meaning that everything is allowed, on condition that both partners agree . . . As a consequence, the field of perversion has narrowed down to sexual harassment and to paedophilia and incest, that is, to those cases where informed consent is lacking.” In the present day, perversion, or paraphilia, as the case may be (which in the DSM consist of sexual sadism, sexual masochism, voyeurism, pedophilia, exhibitionism, fetishism, transvestic fetishism, frotteurism, and paraphilia NOS) is therefore largely restricted to the forensic field (p. 5).

Swales writes, “Forensic diagnoses are based on illegal behaviours, such as rape or voyeurism, and treatment is oriented toward preventing future occurrences of those behaviours.” It is in this context that Swales tells us
that in most forensic settings, “therapists are trying to appeal to a patient’s sense of guilt and empathy to make a case for why his sex offense was wrong and why he should not re-offend” (p. 12) but, she claims, while this one-size-fits-all treatment is useful for those cases whose perversion is in the context of a neurotic disorder, it is not useful for those whose perversion is in the context of a perverse personality structure as described by Lacan. These cases have important similarities to those who are diagnosable as antisocial or psychopathic personalities and form a relatively small proportion of the cases of perversion reviewed by Swales in the literature and in her practice. Interestingly, one of the very few reports of “analytic treatment with an individual who might meet Lacan’s diagnostic criteria for perversion . . . is by Arthur Leonoff (1997), and it is entitled ‘Destruo Ergo Sum: Towards a Psychoanalytic Understanding of Sadism’” (p. 14).

There are two areas in which she makes an especially fruitful contribution to the understanding of the theory implied by Lacan’s work. The first is the division of the big Other into an earlier big Other, represented usually by the infantile mother, and a later big Other, represented by the father or more usually by a later—say, toddler and older—mother. The second is the division into earlier and later functions, or movements, of the paternal metaphor, which leads to the clarification of at least one formulation of the terms alienation and separation (of which there are a number in the literature), the operators introduced by Lacan in Seminar XI when he heads off from the “return to Freud” into his own theoretical developments.

She clarifies certain points new to me: for example, in her description of the real, which is an important clinical concept in describing the pervert’s dynamics, she follows Fink in suggesting that “something anomalous always show up in language, something unaccountable, unexplainable . . . as kinks in the symbolic order” (p. 24). She notes that Jacques-Alain Miller “taught that Lacan conceived of a first real, R1, a real before the letter, and a second real, R2, a real after the letter,” the letter referring to language and the experience of its acquisition as it is used in the symbolic order. The first real consists of unsymbolizable experience and undergoes primary repression forming the core of the unconscious; the second real consists also of what cannot be symbolized but includes trauma-caused experience. Similarly, whereas early Lacan described the “body” as overwritten by the imaginary and then the symbolic, the later Lacan stressed, “We are born with a certain amount of what might be called real or bodily jouissance, which is a ‘substance’ (Lacan, 1975/1998b, p. 26) similar to Freud’s libido” (p. 24). The infant is “full of jouissance,” his “entire body is an erogenous zone,” from which jouissance is gradually “drained off” by development.
This is a form of “castration,” to use the Lacanian terminology, such that the adult is left with achieving drive-motivated bodily jouissance only in the genitals, while the rest of his motivations are described as desire—for more desire, for substitutive satisfactions representing object a, or for love. As Swales so carefully demonstrates, the pervert, who disavows castration, is engaged in jouissance, his own and that of the big Other, while the neurotic, who has more or less accepted castration, is engaged in desire.

Swales clarifies another point in outlining the development of the pervert, to contrast this with the development of the neurotic. In introducing Lacan’s concepts of alienation and separation from Seminar XI, Swales describes a first big Other, the representative to the infant of the outer world, language and culture, which is usually the mother, and a second big Other, which is sometimes the father but is often also the mother. As well she describes two consecutive functions of the paternal metaphor. Alienation of the young child’s subject/self from his image/ego in the mirror, which follows from the introduction of the symbolic or metaphoric aspect of language, is the result of the first movements of the paternal metaphor. This Name-of-the-Father prohibits the child’s use of the mother as an accessible source of jouissance, instituting the social law against incest, which forces the child to incorporate and use language in his communications with his mother. Much of the earlier bodily-based experience cannot be put into words and thus forms the basis of his developing unconscious, resulting in the child’s subject/self becoming divided between conscious and unconscious.

If the child cannot accept this Name-of-the-Father, he will be psychotic in structure and there will be no distinction between his conscious and unconscious. If the role of the actual father is severely eroded by either his own or the mother’s actions, the child disavows the significance of the paternal metaphor, experiences the law as ineffectual or fraudulent, and will be perverse in structure. Although he does enter the symbolic and develop a divided subject, he goes on unconsciously experiencing and seeking elsewhere the jouissance of unimpeded bodily access to the mother. Another way of putting this is that he sees himself as the object a of the big Other, himself as the object-substitute, the male perpetrator, to be used to give the mother-substitute, the female victim, the painfully intense experience of jouissance in the form of shock or terror. In milder instances, he plays the Lothario, rationalizing his activity as “helping” an “inexperienced or innocent” woman who belongs to someone else achieve sexual satisfaction. In brutal or illegal instances he can be seen to be unconsciously trying to
provoke a limiting, controlling response from the paternal big Other, such as the police, that was not available in his early childhood.

The second movement of the paternal metaphor, which has also failed in the person who becomes perverse, occurs in the process of separation. This is described as the prohibition of the mother’s use of the child as her source of jouissance. In her bodily and emotional care of the infant, mother achieves obvious jouissance, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. However, eventually her other interests erode this intense relation of demand. These interests must be put into words—by the second big Other, which may be herself or the father—such that they are gradually experienced by the child as himself not being the target of the jouissance demanded by the big Other/mother but the restrained satisfying object of her desire. The child is thus spared the “crocodile jaws” of the mother and is freer to develop his own subjectivity and language-based desires. The pervert, who has often experienced an over-investment of his mother in his material penis and her diminishment of his father’s value to her, becomes aware of himself as mother’s preferred object, that is, the source of his mother’s (the big Other’s) jouissance, the metonymic repetition of what becomes his mission in life. He is typically described as having an extremely ambivalent relation with his mother, while ignoring or demeaning his father, as he continues throughout life to negotiate being the unconscious mother’s source of jouissance, at the same time as not being overwhelmed by his anxiety of absorption by her.

Swales very carefully and clearly describes these processes, also using the concept of the phallus and castration, showing that the pervert disavows the experience of castration, does not experience the negativization of the imaginary phallus, and identifies himself with the imaginary phallus of the mother, the one he believes she either has or wants. By contrast, the neurotic successfully traverses the first and second movements of the paternal metaphor, experiences “castration,” and gives up identifying with or being the phallus for/of the mother. The neurotic identifies with the symbolic phallus, which cannot be negativized and gives him access to the advantages and responsibilities of culture. This readies him for the process of “sexuation” in which he faces that he is either “without having the phallus” and is female, or is “not without having the phallus” and is male.

Swales discusses many other concepts throughout this section: the ego ideal, the fundamental fantasy of the pervert (contrasting this fantasy with that of the hysteric), the disavowal of reality similar to that seen in the obsessional, and the role of the object a. Throughout, she reminds us that although these processes seem to be developmental steps, they are actually
also occurring throughout the individual’s life, over and over. We all know of people who have not agreed to identify with the more subdued world of desire and the law but rather enjoy the jouissance of self-righteousness, indignant rage, or accusation of the other of their own denied wishes or attitudes. The increase of jouissance-rich addictions in the modern world is a social example. The pervert takes it as his mission to stimulate these states of jouissance in the other, be it friend, partner, or therapist, while at the same time unconsciously trying to make the limiting big Other exist as whole and effective, giving the appearance to the observer of wanting to be stopped or caught.

In her description of a case of fetishism written up by Bruce Fink (pp. 72–4), Swales points out that the patient’s parents were unable to provide him a name for the female genital, leaving him concluding that females have babies because they have a bigger “but” and only with a description of the difference obtained from little friends that the male has one thumb while the female has two. These beliefs resulted in his confusion between the sexes and his own gender-based identity. They combined with his mother’s discovery, when the patient was five, that his father had not actually divorced one of his earlier wives before marrying the patient’s mother, thus increasing the mother’s derision of the father and reducing the symbolic value of the boy’s last name. Then, when he was in adolescence and his mother found him one day masturbating, she came in and put her hand on his erect penis and then walked out of the room. These all contributed to his having a perverse personality structure, potency difficulties, and a boot fetish. These three pages are an example of the clarity and detail with which Swales is able to present this and other cases that provide such an instructive look into this world of which many of us have seen little.

In later chapters, she gives a similarly clear extensive case history and analysis of two men whom she treated in either individual or group psychotherapy, who satisfied many of these features: Ray, “a case of (perverse) exhibitionism” [pp. 183–218], a man on probation who had exposed his genitals to women [and minors] on thousands of occasions, and was incarcerated in state prison on two occasions,” and a contrasting “case of obsessive neurosis and pedophilic sexual interest” (pp. 219–30), a “male in his mid-30’s with a PhD . . . who had recently finished serving a year in prison for possession of about 75 images of child pornography.” The first man, Ray, had a perverse character structure and typified the importance of the presence of the gaze of the big Other in its various manifestations in his formation and practices. His treatment had not been mandated, and he had
been referred by his parole officer to the outpatient psychotherapy practice of Dr. Smith at which Swales worked. The patient “complained of depression and anxiety and also wanted to work on improving relations with his girlfriend” (p. 184), only later becoming interested in working on his problems with exhibitionism. The second man, by contrast, like other neurotics, “tried to avoid the gaze of the Other when acting upon their perverse traits” (p. 221), because it evoked feelings of shame and guilt. Mandated to have treatment, this man “himself wanted to pursue psychotherapeutic treatment . . . [His] initial complaints included symptoms of anxiety, insomnia, and feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Furthermore, [he] wanted to question his sexuality due to his interest in underage girls” (p. 220).

Swales’s final chapter presents her recommendations from her experiences of the principles of treatment necessary to effectively treat someone with a perverse character structure. Because the pervert is dealing in jouissance, he does not come to psychotherapy feeling he lacks anything. Hence he does not readily form a transference to the aspect of the therapist described by the term Subject-supposed-to-know (about the unconscious, including that of the patient, and the patient’s unmet desire). In practice, the pervert goes to some lengths to evoke jouissance in the therapist, in the forms of, for example, anxiety, laughter, annoyance, frustration, horror, self-satisfaction, and surprise. If it doesn’t work the first time, he tries again. He may try overtly to turn the therapist into someone who will act as an authority stepping into his life to prevent his perverse acts, to whom then he can lie or out-maneouvure until he gets caught. If the therapist falls into these roles, the relation between the two takes place in the imaginary register of experience, in which both parties are experienced as equivalent and achieve their goals with the other by some personally compelling means such as manipulation or intimidation.

So the first step in working with the pervert is to bring him to the point of experiencing himself as lacking something that can be related to desire and the symbolic aspects of life, something that requires his own effort to search within himself for clues of disavowed experience, history, and motivation, and their unconscious, and therefore insisting and repeating origins. Group work can be an important initial or corollary treatment, since the group leader may be accepted by the pervert as a big Other that legitimately represents authority, and the group members can more effectively challenge episodes of disavowal than can an individual therapist. Similarly, cognitive behavioural techniques can be developed to give him methods by which to avoid repeating his acts. But individual, and especially Lacanian-oriented, psychoanalytic psychotherapy adds the
important component of attention to the patient’s own unconscious desire, the area of lack, as distinct from his usual situation of this desire being swamped by searches for new experiences of jouissance, and, more subtly, his unconscious desire being shaped by the desire of the big Other. This may be aided by identifying and supporting his more honourable identifications and ideals, even jouissance-yielding versions of these that remain legal and socially beneficial. And it may be possible eventually to achieve some recognition in him of the deeper significance to his development of failures in his parents’ attitudes and behaviours, and of the consequent effects in him and on his “partners” of his own grandiosity and disavowal of the values of societal norms. However, because it would challenge him with guilt, in most cases this recognition would be only momentary and not very influential. It is recognized that although the pervert may be able to limit himself as long as he is in treatment, the advances tend to recede when he is no longer bolstered by this active attention to his own desires, conscious or unconscious. And according to Lacan’s theory itself, the basic character structures do not change over a lifetime, although how they are managed can. So the prognosis for those with a perverse character must remain guarded.

This is a wonderfully written book, making available to those of us who rarely see such cases intimate views of the origins, characteristics, and potential treatments of people with serious, illegal behaviours. The theoretical parts are perhaps too detailed for the more casual professional reader but marvellous for anyone trying to understand and teach Lacanian theory in what I think of as the North American, English-based interpretation, elucidation, and style. And the clinical parts make fascinating reading, interweaving theory and practice very skilfully so that they would be useful for any clinician working with any type of patient.

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