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I would like to extend the concept of dignity, a term usually understood with regard to individuals, to family and kinship relationships. At stake in this extension is our freedom not to fall prey to drives that prevent us from being able to express our desire, pursue it, and rationally evaluate it. This understanding of dignity is a re-interpretation of its meaning that can only be made with the help of psychoanalytic theory, and more especially, the interventions that have been made in that body of theory by feminist analysts and theorists. Psychoanalysis defends dignity as the moral mandate in which all of us are viewed as subjects who, in principle, can articulate their desire as well as morally evaluate their ends. The articulation of desire has always been assumed as necessary for moral freedom and responsibility. Indeed, much political philosophy takes it for granted that we act as actively desiring subjects who simply shape our own lives.¹ Of course, some of the earliest critiques of canonical political theory offered by feminists argued that it was easy to make this assumption because the subjects in the purview of the theory were not all human beings, but straight white men of a certain class background.²

As I have defined it within the legal sphere (Cornell, *Imaginary*), the imaginary domain is the moral and psychic right to represent and articulate the meaning of our desire and our sexuality within the ethical framework of respect for the dignity of all others. This domain is imaginary in the sense that it is irreducible to actual space. But it is also imaginary in a psychoanalytic sense: our assumed identities have an imaginary dimension since they are shaped through our identification with primordial others. Without these identities, we cannot envision who we are. Our identifications with others as they have imagined and continue to imagine us thus form our self-image. These identifications color the way in which we envision ourselves,

but they do not determine the reach of our imagination in dreaming up who else we might be. We must thus distinguish the imaginary from the radical imagination in which we envision new worlds and configure what has otherwise remained invisible. The radical imagination demands some degree of psychic separation. Otherwise our dreams of who we might become, both individually and collectively, would be captured by unconscious claims on us.

Another reason for my psychoanalytic conception of the imaginary is that I defend feminism as an ego ideal. We form ego ideals by envisioning ourselves either through real or imagined others. Since ego ideals are formed through our primordial, pre-oedipal identifications, they carry with them unconscious material that we cannot fully elucidate. Indeed, we can never exactly know how these ideals are formed out of our identifications. Because we are not conscious of how our identifications have shaped these ideals, it is thus futile to think there is an easily accessible genealogical path that, if followed, will return us to the psychic origins of our identifications. What this means, interestingly enough, is that we cannot simply debunk ego ideals without at the same time appealing to some other ideal, even if that ideal is that we should ideally be suspicious of all ego ideals. Such suspicion is undoubtedly an ego ideal of how we should be. We imagine either that we reach an ideal or that we can become what the ideal holds out for us as a possibility. Feminism envisions how we might be as free and equal persons in our day-to-day lives. As an ego ideal, it cannot be imposed. Nor can we say that one must act or be a certain way in order to be a feminist. To make such impositions undermines the power of feminism as an ego ideal. To understand feminism psychically is to defend its spirit of generosity because each woman or man will internalize it as an ideal in her or his own way. This

generosity of spirit does not directly serve the transnational literacy (Spivak) to which international feminisms must aspire. But the understanding that every woman needs to be respected in her effort to link her feminism with actual attempts to change our world through solidarity does indirectly serve the moral imagination. Hence the need to respect the dignity of all women as the ultimate ethical law by which feminist political struggles must proceed.

As I envision it, the feminine within the imaginary domain is that which remains connected yet irreducible to both the requirements of biological reproduction among humans and the cultural laws shaping kinship and family structures. It concerns the subjective aspect of the assumption of sexual identity—the process through which we internalize both an image and a set of norms that shape who we are as well as who we desire and love. This subjective aspect of our identities cannot be easily quantified. In her rightfully famous book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler shows us that gender identity is never simply passively internalized as images and static norms. These images and norms are shaped as we externalize them and act out our lives as men and women. Since we not only assume identities, but also live them, this process of acting-out is inevitable. We are the ones who externalize the meaning of gender. How we assume these identities is never something “out there” that effectively determines who we can be as men and women—gay, lesbian, straight, queer, transsexual, transgender, or otherwise. This process of internalization and externalization is what I mean by the subjective aspect of our life-long experiences with and enactments of sexual difference. The more we actively assume our desire, the less we are captured by traditional gender roles. We become able to assume special responsibility for our lives.

Let me be clear that, by desire, I mean not only sexual desire, but also what we broadly conceive as our ability to chart out a life that is our own. Simply put, when psychoanalysis speaks of individuation it should not be conflated with individualism. Respect for our dignity and our imaginary domain allows us to individuate ourselves enough so that we can claim our desire and take responsibility for our lives. Psychoanalysis serves the dignity of the desiring subject. This may seem a strange use of the word dignity since the con-

cept of dignity is associated with Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. Kant thought our desires were given to us by nature: as desiring beings, we are governed by the laws of nature. Our dignity, on the contrary, lies in our autonomy. As creatures capable of reason, we can value our own ends, but we can also discern which ends we should pursue on the basis of the moral law. There are several formulations of the categorical imperative—Kant's famous name for the moral law—but the essential idea is that we can be self-legislating if we follow a law that embodies our own free will. To exercise our free will is just another way of saying that we abide by the dictates of reason—and by those alone—since everywhere else in our lives we are subject to the laws of nature like all other natural beings. To know whether we are acting from the moral law, we ask ourselves whether we can will our moral decisions such that all other rational beings could accept them as morally right if they, too, were acting in accordance with their reason. We are free insofar as we not only test our moral decisions in accordance with this law, but also represent ourselves as acting solely on its basis.

There have been many critiques of Kant and as many answers to those same critiques. Feminists and others have argued that Kantian moral philosophy is both too individualistic and too rationalistic. For some, this has led to the rejection of the ideas of autonomy, freedom, and dignity. My argument here is that psychoanalysis can help us reshape the ideas of autonomy and freedom, thereby salvaging dignity from a pre-Freudian understanding of desire. Our destiny as desiring beings is inherently social since we are produced as the unique subjects we are through our relations with the primary others in our lives, who are in turn shaped by the symbolic order into which they are thrown. All of us are traversed by unconscious entanglements with our primary others. But the ethical goal of psychoanalysis—to help us see that there is no absolute Other whose *jouissance* threatens us—can return our desire to us. Desire is born with our birth as subjects. Therefore, in principle, it is not something that can be taken away from us. In reality, of course, we might find it impossible to claim. But the fact that, in principle, we can claim it is the basis for our dignity and our freedom to undertake this struggle, without being further hindered by outside forces such as patri-

archal institutions. Because we can never separate our conscious lives from our unconscious investments, we can never be completely independent of the unconscious. Cornelius Castoriadis reminds us that an autonomous subject

is one that knows itself to be justified in concluding: this is indeed, true, and this is indeed my desire. Autonomy is therefore not a clarification without remainder nor is it the total diminution of the discourse of the Other unrecognized as such. It is the establishment of another relationship between the discourse of the Other and the subject's discourse. (107)

We cannot make this separation between the conscious and the unconscious because of the structural moment of the imaginary, which is precisely a structural moment that can never really be surpassed. In the later Lacan, the Imaginary (Lacan always capitalizes the term) is identified with the ego. Because it proceeds through identifications and our investments in the fantasy of the power of others who initially shape our ideals, the ego can actually block the road to the unconscious and to our desire. Yet as a structural moment, the Imaginary is never something we can get rid of once and for all. That is why I believe there can be an alliance between feminist Lacanians and feminists in object relations theory and intersubjective theory. By insisting on the need to protect the ideality of ego ideals, both groups of psychoanalytic feminists give us a creative re-shaping of the affirmative aspect of the Imaginary. But we can only build this alliance if we expand the Lacanian conception of the Imaginary so that it is irreducible to a structural stage neatly distinguished from the subject of the unconscious. If we expand the affirmative aspect of the Imaginary and begin to recognize that it always continues to feed the radical imagination, then we are rendering the Lacanian concept of the unconscious more fluid.

Castoriadis is right that the founding fantasies that individuate us always retain an imaginary dimension because there is no self without them. The Imaginary is a fundamental schema within which we struggle to know ourselves. And so, self-knowledge must proceed through an endless reworking of this basic and yet ultimately imaginary schema:

On the level of the individual, the production of this fundamental phantasy stems from what we have termed the radical imaginary (or the radical imagination); this phantasy itself exists in the mode of the actual imaginary (of the imagined) and is a first signification and cope of subsequent significations. (142)

We can only know ourselves as always already imagined. There is a background we can never fully recapture. That residue of unknowability is what I would call the unconscious. At the level of the psyche, we can never fully consciously grasp ourselves because we are brought into being only within this Imaginary. We draw boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. But these boundaries are just that: drawn. Even if they have an imaginary dimension, we need to be able to project ourselves as free. This projection, which I identify with psychic separation, is what allows us to claim our person: it helps us distinguish between entrapment in an imaginary configuration and the imaginative labor of our own radical imagination. Dignity is the moral law that demands we demarcate our individuation from others during our life's journey. As a name for this law of psychic separation, it should not be confused with an enunciation of the mysterious *jouissance* of the big Other because it is precisely this *jouissance* that cannot be named but only exposed as a fantasy. Dignity helps us understand the necessity of our separation from the fantasy that we are all fated to be captured by *jouissance* of the big Other. Behind this demarcation is an imagination that is our own. Only it can postulate the difference between a radical imagination that is directed toward the future and an Imaginary that captures us in the repetition of the past. We cannot forget the ethical importance of making the distinction between the Imaginary and the radical imagination. I disagree, then, with Castoriadis that the Imaginary should be identified with the radical imagination. Yet I agree with him that the Imaginary remains in constant play in the re-working of the subject of desire.

Psychoanalysis frees dignity from its overly rationalistic and individualist roots. Indeed, it is the radical nature of its inherent critique of individualism as the truth of the subject that gives dignity a new urgency.

We are all produced through the moral law of dignity that, in principle, shapes us as subjects who can claim our desire. That we are born as vulnerable creatures completely dependent on the good will of others makes us fragile. These others are not simply individuals; they are people shaped by the conventions of their times; they are inevitably traversed by their own primary others. That is why it is possible for their conscious and unconscious “secrets” to be passed on to the following generations. Phantoms are in this sense only too real. But their historical actuality is never simply a private affair since they are formed by history, culture, and society. Dignity precedes the subject because without its recognition we can be forever caught in the *jouissance* of the big Other. It is the name for the law that must be transmitted across generations. Since *jouissance* is a legal term that designates the use of another subject without having to justify a claim on her, dignity is the barrier to such use, installed both in the name of desire and in the name of reason.

We are thrown into a world that presents us with situations that inevitably call for some kind of response on our part. But agency does not inhere in our evaluative capacity simply because we can judge an object of our desire as an end. As part of our moral awakening that we must make evaluations and judgments, moral freedom is a practice of self-responsibility we are obliged to assume. When we make these moral evaluations and judgments, we define who we are morally. We exercise our freedom as a narration of our self-responsibility that renders the value-conferring moment in our actions and judgments intelligible as our being called upon to justify ourselves to others with reason and rationality (Cornell, *Spanish Language*). Psychoanalysis deepens our understanding of this moral self-responsibility in at least two ways: we can no longer simply presume the rational subject as capable of pursuing his or her desire, and so, as a result, we can avoid the pitfalls of both subjective idealism and positivistic psychology, neither of which can explain the desire to reconcile one's own freedom with that of others. Since we are dependent on others, and we come into existence as subjects through the discourse of the big Other, our freedom is always social and relational. There is no better example of this dependence than the relationship between mothers and daughters: an “un-

free” mother, cut off from her own desire and from the knowledge of her responsibility for her own life, cannot pass on the value of freedom to her daughter.

Castoriadis explains how psychoanalysis helps us understand that, in principle, we can desire the freedom of the other because

autonomy is not the pure and simple elimination of the discourse of the other but the elaboration of this discourse, in which the other is not an indifferent material but counts for the content of what is said, that an intersubjective action is actually possible and that it is not condemned to remain useless or to violate by its existence what it posits as its principle. It is for this reason that there can be a politics of freedom and that we are not reduced to choosing between silence and manipulation, consoling ourselves with “after all, the other will do whatever he wants with it.” It is for this reason that I am finally responsible for what I say (and for what I leave unsaid).

The final reason for beginning with the autonomy of the individual is because autonomy, as we have defined it, leads directly to the political and social problem. The conception we have discussed shows both that one cannot want autonomy without wanting it for everyone and that its realization cannot be conceived of in its full scope except as a collective enterprise. (107)

Feminism is such a collective enterprise. Unless someone is able to claim desire as her own, she does not even know what she is reasoning about. We can now begin to see why psychoanalysis is never an exclusively private affair. But this is not just because of the symbolic and thus public nature of both sexual difference and gender roles. The understanding of the unconscious as the discourse of the Other—the Other who speaks through and commands the subject—makes the question of the survival of the subject at once ethical and political.

Even though dignity can never be lost because it is always ours in principle, it still needs to be claimed. As I use it, the term *person* encompasses the play of *personae* that is necessary for feminism to flourish as an ego ideal. At the basic level of self-image, the ideal of the person activates the dignity of the subject. Because

of the dominant legal custom within modern liberalism of referring to the subject of rights as a person, this term can be easily translated into Western legal systems. Here we begin to see how psychoanalysis can influence feminist programs of legal reform. Unlike the Lacanians who battled against gay and lesbian parity in France, I do not believe there can be a direct connection between legal reform and psychoanalytic conceptions of the subject. Like John Rawls (*The Idea*), I believe that we should propose ideals for legal reform that can be agreed upon by those who hold many different positions on such basic philosophical ideas as the subject. In the international arena, and particularly when it comes to questions of human rights, I would insist that to demand such agreement rather than try to achieve it through an overlapping consensus forces us to infuse new life into our imperialist legacy (Cornell, *At the Heart*). Nevertheless, this ideal of the person can inform our attempts at legal and political reform in the United States and elsewhere in the world. For such attempts would be tempered by the recognition of how important it is for feminism to retain its power as an ego ideal, shaped differently by different women. A feminism that insists on the psychic entitlement as well as the legal right of all women to claim their own person—and with their person, their desire—will be reluctant to label as false consciousness women's attempts to pursue this goal. If, as a person, she is placed at the level of the ego and the Imaginary, then she will always be re-inventing and transforming what it means for her to claim her desire. There is no such thing as authentic desire that is absolutely true to feminist aspirations. There is no bright line between good desires and bad desires because the whole point here is to emphasize the importance of women claiming their desiring subjectivity. In the name of dignity and its translation into the ideal of the person, we should keep the psychic space open for women to begin to act out their desires, to see what happens and how they will change.

NOTES

¹It needs to be said here that in German idealism, and more specifically in Kant's critical idealism, the inclusion of the power to make ends is stipulated in an ideal of the person, not attributed to actual people. It is a presupposition, not an actuality taken for granted. This is a difference that makes all the difference in my own feminism because my argument is that we must examine more

carefully what is ethically entailed by this stipulation. It is not that we should not stipulate this power in the ideal of the person. Rather, it is that we should understand that the actively desiring subject is itself an ideal and one that feminism has explicitly demanded we give attention. Most schools of utilitarianism attribute this power to people as a matter of fact. The fundamental difference here is that, if the power of actively desiring is a matter of fact, then it makes sense to simply speak of preferences as expressing those actual desires. But if the power of desire is itself an ideal that people can in principle enact, then it makes sense to discuss how this position is to be represented, and once represented, respected. Psychoanalysis insists on the space to represent desire rather than on the mechanisms for valuing preferences. For a classic statement of the stipulation of the free person in Kantian constructivism, which includes the power to actively set ends, see Rawls (*A Kantian Conception*).

²For an excellent discussion of how the dominant vision of the moral subject as man continues to influence moral philosophy, see Margaret Urban Walker.

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