

Comments on Jonathan Lear's Tanner Lectures

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In an 1896 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, the first and primary confidante for his fledgling ideas, the young Sigmund Freud wrote:

“I see that you are using the circuitous route of medicine to attain your first ideal, the physiological understanding of man, while I secretly nurse the hope of arriving by the same route at my own original objective, philosophy. For that was my original ambition, before I knew what I was intended to do in the world.”¹

When philosophy is mentioned in his later, published, writings, it will normally be an occasion for Freud to disavow any such connection with the enterprise of psychoanalysis, a repeated gesture of denial that naturally only goes to show how profound the relationship must really be. For many years now, Jonathan Lear has been one of the great mediators between the worlds of philosophy and psychoanalysis, showing us what they have to learn from each other, and what they have difficulty

accepting from each other. In these lectures he explores a connection between a stance toward oneself that is furthered in the psychoanalytic session, and a stance towards one's life to which Kierkegaard gives the name 'irony'. I will begin my remarks with some thoughts about the general picture of irony presented in Professor Lear's lectures, and its relation to certain philosophical claims for the role of what is variously called 'critical reflection', 'self-consciousness', or the metaphor of "stepping back" from some aspect of one's thought or engagement in the world. I will then focus on the idea of self-knowledge at play in the lectures and the role of something called 'expression' in this context.

Given the topic of irony and the forging of an identity, I hope it will seem appropriate that I start with a depiction of the dramaturgical aspect of the lectures, the narrative composed out of the contending forces he describes so vividly. In many ways we are presented with a narrative of confinement and illusion, and the hoped-for liberation from both. We may begin with the thought that, as he puts it,

"It is a mark of the human that we do not quite fit into our own skins.

That is, we do not fit without remainder into socially available practical identities."

This is said to be a "familiar thought", and indeed it is. The idea of a "remainder" that doesn't fit in finds expression in various guises in philosophy, and Lear himself has

explored one of these themes in his 2000 book Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life (Harvard University Press), and more recently in his 2003 book Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony (Other Press).

In the present context, this remainder is contrasted with what are called “socially available practical identities”, and their role can be seen in the familiar forming and deforming activities of the social world and its institutions. These formations precede the individual, and the anarchic self can never fit entirely comfortably within these structures, which nonetheless present themselves as the only available sources of meaning or companionship. In the civilizing labor of fitting the emerging self into the available social categories, much of the original material will be left out, will find no recognized place in the practical identity as inhabited and recognized by the world. But of course, what it means for these “remainders” to be “left out” is itself a large question. Being “left out” certainly does not mean that the remainders of the self cease to exist. They do persist, and exert their force, and shape the experience and values and desire of the person, even if they are unrecognized as such. Being “left out”, then, means something more like being disavowed, denied recognition.

If, in this picture, the socially available categories are cast as the confining containers, and the social institutions of the family, school, job, and state are cast as the enforcers of these identities, then the philosophers, as presented here, occupy an interestingly equivocal role. For philosophers beginning with Plato have promised

liberation from illusion, and philosophers at least since Kant (but going back to the Stoics) have promised freedom in the form of autonomy or self-rule. Now it is true that what '*gnothi seauton*' meant for the Greeks is surely something different from what 'self-consciousness' means in Kant, but in both traditions, and many others besides, the liberation or self-rule in question is pictured as in the closest possible connection to self-knowledge or a capacity for critical reflection.

And it is here that philosophy's role is shown to be equivocal with respect to the narrative of confinement. For although it presents itself as representing an outside perspective, one not confined to the socially available categories, it is not only just as much an agent of repression as any of the other figures in this story, but in addition is ironically blind to its own complicity in these structures. For the stance of critical reflection that it promotes is not, in fact, a perspective genuinely outside the "socially available identities" after all, but fully within them, serving their interests. One way the philosophical appeal to critical reflection is shown to fail is by reducing it to an impotent recommendation to get a grip, and assert rational control over oneself. Lear describes this in the following terms:

"I then reflect on possible reasons, realize that my actions are out of proportion and resolve to try to get over my anger."

As he goes on to note, this depiction invites the question: "what grounds

my confidence that my resolution to get over my anger will have any impact on my anger?"

If the philosopher pictured here really thought that the sheer realization that one's anger is out of proportion were sufficient to transform it into something better, he is shown to have a naive faith in the power of reason alone.

A second form of failure is less innocent, and closer to a traditional understanding of the idea of irony, for in this scenario the philosopher's procedures of critical reflection, being part of the very structures being reflected upon, turn out to be simply another form of repression itself. This threat is described in relation to the Kantian picture of freedom as expressing a "kingdom of ends".

"In the name of psychic unity, integrity, practical identity and so on, the inhabitants of this kingdom would be splitting off a vibrant part of themselves – treating a deeply rooted source of psychic unity as though it were a mere disruption or distraction from the only unity we have. This would in effect be an act of repression and, as such, the occasion for psychic conflict." 28

We are reminded that any of the procedures of critical reflection can be co-opted and pressed into the service of the very illusion or bondage they purport to be independent

of. As he says, “It is indeed possible that the reflective judgement, rather than abating the anger, serves to preserve and protect it” (14) In relation to the Kierkegaardian problem of ‘Christendom’ in the first lecture, Lear puts this fact into relation with irony in the following way:

“The problem would not be so difficult and irony would not be so important, if reflection and criticism were not already part of the social practice.” 11

Reflection and criticism are thus revealed to be elements of the very same structures that they present themselves as providing an independent perspective on. By contrast, ‘Irony’, trauma, disruption, and the uncanny are various names for the something that can only arrive from outside these structures. In these ways, then, the narrative of inside and outside here is a narrative of the supplement, the excess, the unstable element outside the system.

I’m not sure just how we are to understand Lear’s specific point that reflective judgment may serve to protect and preserve the anger or fear in question, for it seems to me that this is a general liability for any stance or procedure one may adopt with respect to some part of oneself, and not restricted to a particular philosophy or therapeutic practice. Even in those traditions of philosophy that are explicitly therapeutic, such as the practices of Socrates, or Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein, such a risk

is endemic to their procedures. Socratic *elenchus* can itself be pressed into the service of preserving ignorance, Nietzschean genealogy can be practiced in the spirit of the ascetic ideal, and the practice of Wittgensteinian therapeutic reminders can be distorted into the constructions of new orthodoxies, fully as constraining as any picture that held us captive. And of course, we are all familiar with the phenomenon of the analysand who exploits the process of psychoanalysis itself to evade rather than confront the demands of his life. So while it may indeed be therapeutic in the ways Lear describes to cultivate a capacity for irony, this will necessarily be subject to these very same risks. And, on the other hand, if the charge is that philosophers have been blind to these risks, it will be important to the convincingness of this charge that it not rest on characterizing them as traditionally assuming that something called reflection alone was sufficient for radical self-change, that there was no need here for such things as courage, accidents of history, the creation and destruction of new forms of life, or conversion experiences, for one would have to search far in the tradition to find philosophers who would fit that description.

This, however, belongs with the fact that along with the inside and outside of structures and identities, there are also figures who are depicted as either inside or outside of the perspective disclosed by irony or the remainder. (This much of the traditional dramatic/rhetorical meaning of irony, in terms of an implied division within an audience, is, I take it retained in Lear's account.) So, on the one hand, there are the figures of irony like Socrates and Kierkegaard who see the infinite questionability of our

lives and our identities. And on the other hand, there are the figures, like Alcibiades, who “don’t get it”, or who are complacently inhabit their practical identities as though they were matters of simple membership in a group, the kind of accreditation that comes with simply having a driver’s license, valid for driving on the left-hand lane of life, perhaps, but hopeless for travel on the right-hand lane of irony. As a narrative of uncapturability, then, it requires a few philosophers to play the role of straight man, or straight woman, as the foil to the ironic figure who brings the structures into question. We are introduced to them early in the lectures as the mere pretenders, those who are “perfectly sure of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being” (Lecture One, p. 5)

In the drama of confinement and exclusion, these figures are depicted as located comfortably within a structure which, from the perspective of irony, is shown to be less complete, less assured than they imagine. The requirements of conflict for a drama of this sort also exert a pressure on the narrative to cast different figures as antagonists, and to depict one of them as denying or repressing the possibilities of the other. The specifically spatial language of confinement and exclusion asserts itself here as well, and in the case of some work of mine, for example, we are told that “Moran draws the map of self-knowledge in such a way that there is no place in it for the form of making the unconscious conscious that I take to be central to psychoanalysis.” [my emphasis]¹⁵, and in particular that he has “left no room for the peculiar case of consciously fantasizing.” From this and other critical remarks, one would receive the impression that I had presented a theory of psychoanalytic practice, and inexplicably left

out of account such things as transference, fantasy, construction, resistance, projection and the like. I'll say just a few things here to correct that impression.

Since there is much in Lear's account of psychoanalytic practice that I find myself in agreement with, or to which I must defer, I would if possible like to resist the role of opponent here. I would like to think that nothing I say in that book or elsewhere excludes the phenomenon Lear is concerned with here. I had not presented an account of unconscious fantasy or the interpretation of transference in psychoanalytic practice in my book, and I would be impressed if he thought I was capable of that. Very briefly, what I am concerned with there, under the heading of the notion of avowal, is the ordinary phenomenon that a person can come to know, for instance, whether he resents his sister by thinking about his sister, or that he is dreading the holidays by thinking about the holidays. In some other cases, however, this first-person access to myself might be blocked, and I might only be able to know about my dread or my resentment by the same sort of observations that another person could make of me, by seeing how I tend to act or respond in certain situations, and not by attending to the objects of these attitudes of mine. What I try to account for in the book is why the former kind of access to my own attitudes, self-knowledge in that sense, should be seen as fundamental; the capacity to know how I think or feel about something in thinking about that very thing. Now the relevant idea of "thinking about" here is a deliberately capacious notion, and is something that will vary greatly from context to context, very much including such things as musing on some possibility, dwelling on some hurtful remark, or re-telling the incident

to one's analyst. All of these can count as the sort of thinking about the object of one of my attitudes that puts me in touch with my attitude itself. This is not simply a matter of telling oneself (or being told) to be reasonable, but rather of having the world that my moods, feelings, and attitudes are directed upon be available to me in my relation to my moods, feelings and attitudes themselves. If my reflection on the world that my attitudes are directed upon (e.g., my sister, the holidays) is unrelated to the shape of my attitudes themselves, and my access to my resentment or dread, then these are conditions I am merely assailed by rather than attitudes of mine that I am participant in. Psychoanalysis, particularly in the conducting of the transference, engages with the subject in quite different ways, but restoring that capacity belongs with the very idea of the therapeutic, and the understanding of why self-knowledge should matter at all, beyond satisfying the absorbing interest we tend to take in ourselves.

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One thing that may separate us is my own sense of the enormous heterogeneity in the idea of self-knowledge that has attracted philosophical attention. The form, and meaning, and import of self-knowledge varies enormously across the terrain that fall under the idea of 'first-personal', or 'subject position', or 'self-knowledge', and features or problems associated with one of them cannot be simply carried over to another one. My relation to my fantasy life, for instance, though indeed a matter of my subjectivity, and my understanding of myself and my world, is something deeply unlike my relation to

the sensation of pain in my knee, which in turn is something deeply unlike my relation to what I know as an agent about what I am doing now, or how I know what it is that I believe about something, which is different again from all the ways in which my knowledge of myself is a matter of embodied orientation, so that I know myself in much the same way that I know my surroundings, practically and tacitly.

These are all modes of subjectivity, in one way or another, and there are of course conceptual relations among all of them and more, but at the same time the very idea of 'immediacy' in self-knowledge, or the idea that the subject enjoys some sort of 'authority' with respect to them, will either mean very different things in these different contexts, or indeed will not apply at all.

It is not yet clear to me how to make good sense of the idea, but if there is a notion of 'first-person authority' that describes something real in our relation to our fantasy lives, especially as these are indeed structuring with respect to our experience, this will have to be something very different from related notions, as discussed by myself and others. Consider two ways that philosophers have approached the distinctiveness of the first-person:

One is Wittgenstein's thought that, for certain first-person present-tense thoughts there is no logical room for doubt (as is sometimes claimed about the case of pain; cf. Philosophical Investigations §§ 246 & 247).

Another is the idea that person can know what she is doing or what she thinks

about something in virtue of her being active or committal with respect to an action or a thought (something explored in my book and elsewhere).²

The very possibilities of knowledge or authority in these two cases are enormously different, and differently contested. (And indeed, in those cases where doubt is logically excluded, Wittgenstein will argue that there is no application for the idea of self-knowledge either.) The present point, however, is that neither of these thoughts would apply to various other elements of my subjectivity, for instance, my knowing whether some present experience of mine is a memory or not. And one or another of the ideas of knowledge or authority may have no application at all to my relation to my dreams, my moods, or my deeper motivations. In response to the charge that I have formulated a notion of self-knowledge or first-person authority that fails to transfer to the case of unconscious fantasy, I would have to embrace the charge and say that these notions cannot be simply transferred from one region to another, but need to be defined anew in each different context if they are to mean anything. Whatever might be meant, for instance, by speaking of the ‘transparency condition’ as applied to unconscious fantasy will need its own specific motivation and defense. I don't see this as having been provided here, but it could well be something worth developing.

In spelling out what will count for him as “making an unconscious practical identity conscious”, Lear appeals to a notion of ‘expression’ as the “replacement” of some non-verbal behavior with a piece of speech. This is seen as related to another

distinction, between merely reporting on one's anger (from the outside, as it were), and the full-blooded expression of one's anger. This is a distinction important to early work of mine³, but David Finkelstein and later Lear take it to be best understood in connection with a remark of Wittgenstein's about the "replacement" of a natural expression of pain with a verbal utterance such as "I've got a slight headache today". (Investigations § 244).

As with the ideas of 'transparency' and 'first-person authority', I doubt that this thought of Wittgenstein's can be adopted in this way. Even in the context of the Philosophical Investigations § 244, his remark that in some cases "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying" is presented by him as merely "one possibility", and is restricted to special case of pain or other sensations. The context is one where he is asking how words come to refer to sensations in the first place, and not one where the question is what makes one form of expression more fully-present than another, or how someone might progress from merely reporting to a more fully felt self-expression.

It is out of the grammatical variety and heterogeneity described above that Wittgenstein distills a particularly pure and primitive form of purported subjective unchallengability, the case of immediate sensations, of knowing that I am in pain. This notion is not meant to be representative of the first-personal generally, but is rather constructed by Wittgenstein to fit the requirements of the picture he is opposing, the picture of the inner realm containing inner objects which I can observe and name.

The strategic point at this stage of Philosophical Investigations is to apply pressure to this picture of the inner by examination of what should be the very best case, the most vivid instantiation of the picture of “object and designation”: the throbbing pain seizing my attention right now. The thought is, if the picture of our subjectivity as an inner realm could make sense anywhere, it would have to be here. Hence if it can be made to fail here, the picture of the inner realm will be fatally undermined. This is a special case, in several ways.

Consider the case of pain in contrast with other forms of knowing oneself, or not knowing oneself, that make their appearance in Wittgenstein:

- my knowing what I or we would mean by a certain expression in my language, the whole question of the first-person plural in Wittgenstein⁴,

- my knowing my way around a city,

- or my knowing whether it was really love which I felt, which is different from identifying a feeling, Wittgenstein tells us, because love is put to the test, whereas a sensation or a headache are not (Investigations § 587).

- Or the way I can say that it's King's College and not another just like it, that I am imagining to be on fire (Blue Book p. 39).

- Or the difference between feeling pain and feeling grief, and whether one could feel profound grief for just one second. (Investigations p. 174)

- Or how I may know, but not really know, my own fear, and how my utterances of fear run the entire spectrum of cases from the instinctive shriek, to the statement “I'm

still a bit afraid, but no longer so much as before” (Investigations p. 188)

Wittgenstein uses the discussion of expressions of fear to explicitly disavow any general ‘expressivist’ account of the first-personal discourse:

“A cry is not a description. But there are transitions. And the words “I am afraid” may approximate more, or less, to being a cry. They may come quite close to this and also be far removed from it.” (Investigations p. 189)

It is the special features of the case of ‘pain’, that suggest the idea of ‘expression’ at work in the thought about teaching the child “pain behavior”, so that the natural response of crying is “replaced” by the utterance “That hurts!” or perhaps “It still hurts, but it’s not as bad as the day before.” This comparison suggests itself to Wittgenstein because the case of pain seems to be one where the very idea of doubt or uncertainty in one’s own case is difficult to make sense of. His opponent in the argument interprets this fact as evidence for the excellence of our detection of an ‘inner state’, and hence as representing our best case for a piece of knowledge that is absolutely certain, immune to challenge. Wittgenstein turns this thought on its head and argues that if doubt or uncertainty are logically excluded, then so is knowledge or certainty. On these assumptions the first-person statements of pain cannot, for logical reasons, be seen as reports on something independent of themselves which they aim to describe accurately.

Hence the comparison with a cry, which does not play that kind of role in discourse, though as we have seen an utterance such as “I am afraid” can lie anywhere at all on the spectrum from cry to description. And this spectrum itself does not represent anything like the transition from forms of self-expression that are more fully experienced to those that are less so, so it is unclear how this thought of Wittgenstein's could be applied to the case of, e.g., the acknowledgement of one's anger within the context of transference.

The more important point for our present purposes, however, is that very little in this context of argument can be applied to the case of practical identities or unconscious fantasies. No one, I take it, would want to say of either of these aspects of our lives that “here the expression of doubt or uncertainty is senseless”. If anything, given how buried and/or pervasive either unconscious fantasy or practical identity can be in one's life, it would be closer to the truth to say that it is the expression of anything approaching certainty that would be absurd. And similar differences would show up from elsewhere in the range of forms of subjectivity and self-knowledge. For instance, nothing more characterizes my relation to my intentions than the fact that here the expression of uncertainty, of my being more or less certain, etc. is fully at home if anywhere in life. And yet my relation to my intentions is surely a first-person phenomenon as well, and matter of my knowing or not knowing, my own mind.

The idea of “replacing” one mode of expression for another is not perfectly clear to me, particularly in the therapeutic context where Lear is importing the idea. On a

basic level, we might ask, if the two modes of expression are really doing the same work, then what is the point of "replacing" one with the other? If we take the notion of replacement literally, then what is gained, for instance, by substituting some words for some tears? Does that mean that the tears are now unnecessary, having been replaced by something else?⁵ And on the other hand, if the verbal expression and the non-verbal expression are not doing the same work, so that the verbal expression, for instance, means that the person can now tell us about her pain or her anger and what it means to her, then this seems to re-assert all the old problems about how such a remarkable transition is possible, how a person can be in a position to know these things without having to observe herself the way we would have to observe her to know her condition.

Despite these differences, Lear and I want several of the same things from an understanding of the first-person, and its relation to self-expression. We share the view, which is not universal among contemporary philosophers, that a philosophical account of self-knowledge is obliged to make understandable why it should matter, why it should be so difficult, and why it should be different in form from our knowledge of other things, including knowledge of other people. We both share a concern with the connections between philosophy, self-knowledge, and certain ideas of the therapeutic. Anyone with these commitments will need to account for why, out of all the ways we do express ourselves, the expression of ourselves in words should be privileged in any way at all, why finding words for ourselves, and a context for their utterance, should have anything

in particular to do with the forms of self-knowledge that have something to do with psychic health. I think that about this question in particular, philosophers and others still have very far to go. I take it that an unconscious fantasy can indeed be structuring of one's life, and hence a source of psychic unity in that sense, and hence can express itself in one's life, without itself needing to verbalized at all, and may indeed be all the healthier for that. So we will need to say more about just where and when a part of the self can be said to be not fully owned when one is unable to give voice to it in speech, or how bringing it to words alters its character. It is an ancient idea, and surely part of what Freud took from the philosophical tradition in formulating the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, the "talking cure"; but, as with the task of becoming human, we are still far from understanding what that means.

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¹ Letter of January 1, 1896, in The Origins of Psycho-Analysis, edited by Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris (Basic Books, 1954).

² Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge (Princeton, 2001)

³ 'Self-Knowledge: Discovery, Resolution, and Undoing', European Journal of Philosophy, 1997.

⁴ Most memorably explored in the work of Stanley Cavell, beginning with Must We Mean What We Say? (New York 1969, and Cambridge, 1976) and in The Claim of Reason (Oxford, 1979).

⁵ On p. 12 Lear says that 'expression' in the special sense means: "A truth-claim that is a manifestation of the very anger about which the truth claim makes it's claim" But this will be true of simple statements of belief, as well as many other first-person statements, for example, verbal declarations of hope or conviction or regret or even conditional-belief. Their statements too are manifestations of the very condition I claim for myself, but this is not for reasons that have to do with the replacement of some pre-verbal natural reaction that is then replaced by some verbal form.