

Prelude to the 2012 International *Rendezvous* of the Forums of the Lacanian Field, Rio de Janeiro

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‘Doctor, do you think you can help my son?’

...I wished I knew.

‘Look, madam, I have to listen to him before answering your question. Now, tell me, what have you been doing yourself to help him?’

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It takes courage for a mother to bring her child to a psychoanalyst: she is ashamed of exposing her narcissistic wound, but she is nevertheless courageous enough to transcend her sense of defeat and humiliation. Her question, like all pertinent questions, contains an answer, or at least the beginning of an answer. She must have imagined that I would be able to help her son — otherwise, why bother to bring him to me? She must have reflected also on the ambiguities and uncertainties that surround the term ‘help’: she took her son to eight different professionals of mental health (as they are called), who apparently were of no help, despite the fact that some of them had promised to be helpful. Her experience of multiple professional consultations made her realise that there was an ethical dimension in her trying to help her son. Although her knowledge of psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts was very limited, she thought that in coming to see a psychoanalyst she would probably be offered not only a different clinical, ‘technical’ approach, but also an alternative ethical stance. She was right in thinking as she did. Apart from other psychopathological and clinical considerations, an ethical question was patent in the case: the nine-year-old son was fed up with being helped ‘by all those idiots who think they know things but know nothing’, and ‘did not want help, did not need help and just wanted to be left in peace alone’.

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, famous in the English-speaking world, on whose work Lacan commented just after the end of World War II, tells an anecdote regarding a patient who came to see him in a state of great agitation and irradiating fear all around him. Bion told the patient that he should not worry, that he was safe there, as he, Bion, was not in any way trying to help him.

Helping can be dangerous, particularly in these times of so many therapeutic and pharmacological industries eager to help you. Freud had already warned us against *furor sanandis*, or the passion for curing anybody at any time and at any price...whether the patient wants that

kind of cure or not. This continues to be for psychoanalysts an ethical problem of the first order, as according to cultural expectations a psychoanalyst is somebody who is there to help, and people of all ages who come to us and eventually become analysands genuinely want help. There is nothing wrong with that: on the contrary, it would be very strange indeed if the prospective analysand were not interested in receiving any help at all, as it would be very strange indeed if the analyst declared that he is not interested in helping the patient and this declaration truly represented his policy, not to be confused with a tactical intervention *à la* Bion. We would quickly run out of business, at a time when psychoanalysis is the object of sinister, hateful defamatory attacks and pseudo-objective evaluations of its therapeutic efficacy that conclude that it is not helpful at all in the treatment of human conditions and tragedies — the latter defined in consonance with the pseudoscientific categories of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV, soon to be replaced by the DSM-5, which does not promise to be any better than its predecessor).

But our capacity to be helpful to other speaking beings, which is not to be denied, needs to be questioned within the frame of that treatment of human *jouissance* that constitutes the psychoanalytic discourse — questioned like everything else in our field, the Lacanian field, the field of *jouissance* and its vicissitudes.

Our response is an act, and as such it must be administered *responsibly*: it is not for nothing that *response* and *responsibility* have a common etymology. As psychoanalysts we assume the responsibility of responding to questions or demands that are pertinent; we assume responsibility for the content and effects of our response; and we must also assume responsibility for our function of facilitating that others produce creative, constructive questions, but also answers. Colette Soler says somewhere that neurotics are always full of questions, but they are not particularly interested in obtaining answers. Experience shows that good questions elicit reasonable answers.

Our responsible responses concern questions and demands posed by individual subjects, our fellow speaking beings, as well as the questions and demands put to us by the life of the culture of which we are part, in so far as there still are people and institutions interested in what analysts have to say concerning the very serious problems that underlie the discontents of our civilisation and even threaten its very existence. The authors of the previous *Preludes* have already referred eloquently to the challenge posed to psychoanalysis by the excesses and losses of *jouissance* engendered by the voracious capitalism of our era. It is precisely this voracity that threatens psychoanalysis which, as Lacan said forty years ago (in *Television*), is one of the few discourses that remain viable for us.

In 1932, under the auspices of the League of Nations, Sigmund Freud engaged in an exchange of correspondence with Albert Einstein. Einstein wrote first and posed a difficult yet pressing question, a question that was urgent in those dark years of Nazi domination over a portion of the world; the question remains relevant, and is as urgent today as ever: *Why war?* Einstein was even more precise: ‘Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?’ (Freud 1933, 197). Despite telling Ernest Jones privately that he found the task ‘tedious and sterile’, Freud responded to the task. Fighting his own reservations, as a man and as the creator of psychoanalysis he attempted to make a contribution oriented by the ethics of psychoanalysis. His conceptual discussion of the problem and the outline of practical solutions for dealing with human violence have retained their validity to this day, and nobody can say that this response of a psychoanalyst (even if Freud is not just *any* psychoanalyst) is obsolete after eighty years, which have been eighty years of wars, with no single year free from a few dozen wars around the planet. Every human being would benefit from reading and re-reading Freud’s seminal text, which has not lost any of its power for inspiring theoretical reflection *and* concrete actions that, no doubt, require courage — the sort of courage that a mother needs to bring her son to a psychoanalyst — but which are certainly not impossible.

Einstein chose war as the topic and, when asked to recommend an interlocutor, immediately thought of Freud as the person who had something to say on the matter. Today it is not for sure that a psychoanalyst would receive a similar request, although it is true that Freud was not just *any* psychoanalyst. But the main problem we face, in my view, is that the response of a psychoanalyst is not as valued as it once was.

Without having exhausted the issue (as life goes on and poses new questions and problems every day), we have studied at length the responses that psychoanalysts have been able to provide and which constitute a valid, unique and creative alternative to the responses offered by religion, speculative philosophy, different ideologies and scientific developments increasingly subservient of the anarchic interests that dominate the current phase of capitalism. The responses of psychoanalysts have ranged from those that our discourse is able to give to suffering individuals; to those that have emerged in the analytic discourse through the work of analysands who have passed, or at least have attempted to pass, to the position of analyst; to the questions arising from the forms adopted by the clinical structures in our day; to the multiple modes of breakdown and disarray in the sociopolitical domain that are symptomatic of cultural malaise. The psychoanalytic responses may well be regarded as modest, particularly when one compares them with the magnitude and severity of the problems that we face at all levels of human life. Yet they are not to

be dismissed as inconsequential, as the reactionary forces of the anti-psychoanalytic establishment would like.

‘The struggle is not over’, said Freud towards the end of his life. It is certainly not over for us, and our *Rendezvous* in Rio de Janeiro is a precious opportunity for our Forums and our School: we can compare notes, learn from each other and contribute to what our community can do so that psychoanalysts can produce even better responses.

Freud, S. (1933b). 'Why War?', SE XXII. 197–215.