

Addressing the Crisis of Meaning: Towards a 'psychotheological' reading of the unconscious

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I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over....

(Nietzsche, *Zarathustra's Prologue #4*)

Introduction

Philosophical counsellors have often staked their claim to a difference from conventional psychotherapy in terms of their capacity to address crises of meaning—disorders of mind or spirit irreducible to pathological factors and requiring a specifically philosophical form of engagement. Provisionally accepting this self-definition, we might ask: what could be the importance of taking account of the unconscious when addressing a crisis of *meaning*?

Since the notion of the unconscious is in popular parlance understood to refer to a site in the person of merely pathological pressures, many philosophical counsellors consider the unconscious to lie outside the provenance of their expertise (if they believe in its existence at all). If, however, the unconscious is somehow bound up with what we refer to as the sense of there being or not being 'meaning' (hence if 'meaningfulness' is not limited to what can be grasped consciously and by cognitive means) then the unconscious would be something that must be addressed just in so far as the question—or crisis—of meaning is being addressed. In addressing such a crisis of meaning, indeed, it seems that something which is and must remain enigmatic is being evoked. If it therefore appears unlikely that an answer to the sense of life's meaninglessness can come through any simple formula or practice, then we are led to consider ways of approaching this problem that are neither prescriptive nor strictly a matter for a cognitive therapy. Our question about the importance of the unconscious might then become: How can philosophy engage the sense of enigma that attaches to the problem of what the sources of a sense of meaning (or of 'proper' meaninglessness) might be? And what would lead us to think that the question of meaning touches on something that eludes the conscious self and its capacity to reason or otherwise take full responsibility for itself?

In what follows I first develop an account of a certain type of crisis of meaning, one we can link to what Nietzsche called 'nihilism' and which we may think of as an experience of life as lacking ultimate purpose or intelligibility. I then outline an account of the unconscious which allows us to view unconscious life as similarly located at the limits of intelligibility and purpose and thus as presenting opportunities and problems that parallel those of the nihilistic crisis. By focussing on Judge Daniel Schreber's famous breakdown – a case discussed by Freud – I try to draw out some contrasts between a psycho-pathological account of breakdown and a more philosophical one, but conclude that philosophical counsellors may

have much to learn from psychoanalytic approaches about the importance of engaging unconscious life. This possibility of engagement is one I link in turn to a Wittgensteinian sense of the 'enigmatic' life of language and of a philosophic therapy that holds open rather than closing off a sense of the ungraspable. Philosophy, I argue, cannot claim to know the unconscious mind. Philosophical counselling must, however, learn ways to acknowledge the uncanny pressure and desire of unconscious life.

What Is the Meaning of a Crisis of Meaning?

The 'crisis of meaning' is often linked in a rather casual but nonetheless significant way with the crisis Nietzsche spoke of when, in the persona of a madman, he announced the death of God. The era of nihilism ushered in by this event is one which for Nietzsche has an enigmatic aspect, bound up with a fundamental equivocality. Nihilism takes an 'active' and a 'reactive' form. In the former case it is the sign of an 'increased power' of the spirit, whereas in the latter it signals a decline and a recession of these powers (Nietzsche, 1967, #22, dated 1887). But of what power does Nietzsche speak? Active nihilism is perhaps the ability to confront the meaningless vista of existence after the death of God has deprived us of an ultimate horizon and to do so without despair. Passive nihilism, meanwhile, gives into what remains an unconscious desire to re-institute an ultimate source of authority. He writes in a note dated 1887:

The nihilistic question 'for what?' is rooted in the old habit of supposing that the goal must be put up, given, demanded *from outside*—by some *superhuman authority*. Having unlearned faith in that, one still follows the old habit and seeks *another* authority that can *speak unconditionally* and *command* goals and tasks. The authority of *conscience* now steps up front (the more emancipated one is from theology, the more imperativistic morality becomes) to compensate for the loss of a *personal* authority. Or the authority of *reason*. Or the *social instinct* (the herd). Or *history* with an immanent spirit and goal within, so one can entrust oneself to it. One wants to get around the will, the willing of a goal, the risk of positing a goal *for oneself*; one wants to rid oneself of the responsibility (one would accept fatalism). Finally, *happiness*—and with a touch of Tartuffe, the *happiness of the greatest number*.

(Nietzsche, 1967, #20)

There is much for a philosophical counsellor to consider in this passage as an exemplary analysis of what a person who faces this type of crisis of meaning might seek. At the very least, there is a trenchant warning to the counsellor about offering a set of responses to a crisis of meaning that would ultimately fail to address the bottomless character of this problem, evading the abyss into which it seems impossible for us to gaze. It is clear that Nietzsche sees a number of complex substitutions occurring once the sense given to life by the faith in a God whose purposes the world was once thought to contain has been undone. Since the theological ground of the plenitude of meaning 'disappeared', we seem unable

to confront what appears as a 'senseless' world and we therefore seek partial solutions for our sense of lack in a variety of moralistic gestures. But what does Nietzsche intend by stressing the importance of a set of evasions that are equivalent to a refusal to either will or to risk 'positing a goal *for oneself*'? Here, one might imagine, would lie the general form of a diagnosis and thus answer to the problem of meaning that escapes mere 'substitution'. On a familiar view of such an answer, the meaning that was once held to derive from the sovereignty of God must now be acknowledged to derive only from the sovereign self. The interesting and problematic point to consider, however, in offering some such 'answer' to nihilism, is the character of the substitutions Nietzsche lists. Although all involve turning oneself over to the authority of something other than oneself, this 'turning over' can nonetheless have a profoundly *internal* character. 'Conscience', for instance, despite its being in some deep sense a matter of one's own capacity to decide moral matters, remains a 'substitution' for the 'personal authority' of God. 'Reason', too, which one might think of as integral to any autonomous ability to posit goals—and certainly would be within a Kantian framework for considering such questions—remains no less a substitution for God's role in providing purposes than the turn to social mores or a faith in the necessity of the historical process.

How, then, do we move beyond the domain of substitutions in reconfiguring our orientation towards problems of meaning? By speaking of an *unconscious* habit of seeking purposes beyond oneself, one might indicate only that this habit is unknown or unacknowledged, so that by bringing it to consciousness it would in a sense become cured. As soon as we 'know' that we continually desire to re-institute an authority that would bear the ultimate force of God's commands we can begin to learn to 'do without' such reference points. This would be the existential hero's form of asceticism, requiring of him that he reconstitute himself as 'centre' of the meaning of events by becoming self-conscious of and resistant to the 'habit' which drove him to renege on his own responsibility. It is an easy reading to make, moreover, of what Nietzsche is saying here. But is it the only sense we can give to what is unconscious in the 'habit' at the root of passive nihilism, always looking for a source of meaning outside the self? Is the unconscious habit only to be understood as that pathology of self to which self-knowledge responds with an enabling clarity? Instead I would suggest that we pay attention to how the unconscious habit of which Nietzsche speaks pertains particularly to problems of authorization.

The 'old habit' bound up with a desired sense of meaning is further bound up with the sites of institutionalisation of authority. The goal 'given' by a superhuman authority can be more or less adequately provided by the substitutive forms of conscience, or reason, or 'the herd'. The question here is whether we respond fully to the issues Nietzsche raises around authority by imagining the problem is simply how to become an individual, to honour one's own authentic ground of being, to learn to think and act through positing a goal *for oneself*, thus shifting the bases for authority from the outside to within. Or whether there is something too straightforwardly oppositional about this 'for another' or 'for oneself' schema which fails to do justice to the problem of what it is to be oneself in view of an authority integral to meaning though non-identical with it, which never entirely respects the difference between self and other; an authority which must always construct oneself-as-another and the other- as-self.

This latter way of looking at things might allow us to deconstruct the oversimplistic sense that meaning either comes from 'elsewhere' (from some transcendent ground of being) or from 'inside', from some capacity for generating one's own sense of purpose. In place of this opposition, stressed by a certain existentialist way of thinking, the problematic of nihilism might be articulated less around the question of the *source* of authority (inside or outside) than around its *force*—its ability to command. In other words, the problem of meaning and the issue of positing a 'goal' for oneself cannot be fully grasped through a simple division of what is internal and thus assumed to be fully 'mine' and what is external and can thus be understood as imposed upon me. Further, we should note that the ability of authority to command always bridges a relation between self and other, precisely because to accept the force of *authority* is never simply to be *forced*. Authority proper, that is, symbolic authority, is at its most radical level, always powerless. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, 'it is a certain 'call' which cannot effectively force us into anything, and yet, by a kind of inner compulsion, we feel obliged to follow it unconditionally'. Indeed, by virtue of this unconditionality, 'authority is inherently paradoxical', since 'we obey a person in whom authority is vested irrespective of the content of his statements (authority ceases to be what it is the moment we make it dependent on the quality of its content) yet this person retains authority only insofar as he is reduced to a neutral carrier, bearer of some transcendent message...'. (Žižek, 1992, pp.94–5). There is something about authority that forbids it from ever being fully rationalised, for whereas reasons persuade, authority *commands*. Equally, there is something about authority that refers it beyond what an individual can be imagined to contain by himself.

Now we may begin to forge some links between the question of authority—that is, the character of *recognition* of authority and its *power* to compel—and the question of the unconscious and its status. The unconscious, in the sense I want to begin to delineate here, would not be posited primarily as operating on the terrain of what is 'unknown' in the self qua '*hidden*' force, but more specifically would be invoked as operative at that problematic nexus of authority and selfhood, where in order for there to be authority at all—even the authority of 'positing one's own goals'—some *split* in the self, some division of what commands from what obeys must be assumed. Similarly, the goal that is posited 'for oneself' can never be sustained simply through one's own effort of willing, since it must contain that element of externality that enables it to either command the will or allows the will to *desire* it. The 'unconscious', we might postulate, is bound up with this 'split' aspect of authority and with the feeling of compulsion which we seek to problematically 'assume' as our own in securing for ourselves a sense of meaning *commensurate* with the force of authority. If this can be made to seem plausible, as I shall try to show it might be in the sections that follow below, then the problem posed by nihilism might now be said to lie precisely in the nature of the attempt to 'cover over' this split and through one 'substitution' or another to disavow the rupture it affords to any project of identifying the sovereign self with the 'source' of meaning.

Taking up this line of thought would lead us to think of the power Nietzsche links to active nihilism less on the model of self-determination (that is, of *autonomy* in the Kantian schema, which opposes the *heteronomy* of pathological influence) and more on the model of what he calls in his narrative of Zarathustra an 'undergoing', a process I shall suggest we must ultimately conjoin to Nietzsche's

interest in an *aesthetics* of existence. Nietzsche often suggested that life would be unbearable without art. The role he saw art playing for us, however, was never that of simply securing for us an illusion of harmony and meaning. Rather, Nietzsche conceives of art precisely in terms of a 'split' between what he refers to as the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses. Whereas the Apollonian art-impulse allows us to sustain a sense of beauty and measure in the universe, the Dionysian allows us to experience the ultimate groundlessness of that vision of order. In the 'paradoxical' combination of these two impulses in Greek tragedy, Nietzsche saw a model for the complex response to the 'death of God' that is demanded of us today.

An aesthetics of existence is that which sustains us in our desire for life but without allowing us to believe in any fundamental meaning that would *ground* (or ultimately explain) our lives. A similar role is played in Nietzsche's late thought by the figure of eternal return—which offers an image of life desired endlessly but without this desire ever finding a ground outside the passage of time itself (Nietzsche, 1988, #341). The problematic 'gap' that opens up at the point of authority's excess of force over meaning coupled with an insistent reference beyond itself, is met in the thought of eternal return, *not* with the attempt to *close the gap over* but with an affirmation of desire for life in excess of ultimate meaning. The importance of the unconscious emerges here in an ambiguous way as the abyss of consciousness—that out of which it rises and into which it sinks. Consciousness is defined by Nietzsche as 'superficial' not by contrast with something 'deep' but rather as the *closed* system of intelligibility contrasts with the *abyssal* activity of unconscious life (Nietzsche, 1988, #354). Consciousness forms 'closed' circuits of interpretation in a sense that allows us to equate what is compelling with what is meaningful, thereby evading the paradoxical character of authority's form, which eschews rationalization whilst always also referring beyond itself. In a sense, then, the problem with the structure of faith that began with God's authority and is now repeated in the many substitutive forms Nietzsche details in his treatment of nihilism, is not that it fails to originate in the *self* but rather that the sense of the meaning provided by this structure fails to *exceed* the closure enforced by the requirement of intelligibility.

In other words, far from demanding a retreat from an externally derived to an internally derived sense of the sources of one's goals and purposes, Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism would point us to consider a problematic refusal of exteriority (resulting in formalism) which runs through all these 'closed' references to authority that substitute for God. One could even say that the crisis of meaning arises out of the *rationalization* of authority in a sense that would include as problematic the attempt to make *oneself* the foundation of all authority. Eternal return, on the other hand, is above all else, *not* a closed circuit of repetition, but offers the attempt to think *out* of a crisis of meaning *into* an ability to desire a life that is and remains enigmatic; a life that is never reducible to my goals and will.

Let me now explicate further the considerations which lead me to these last, perhaps rather odd and surprising formulations.

The Unconscious of a 'Psychotheology'

In what follows, I deploy Eric Santner's idiosyncratic 'theological' reading of the nature and task of psychoanalysis in order to further explicate the role one might

accord here to an 'unconscious' (Santner, 2001). Santner's study bears the title, 'On the *Psychotheology* of Everyday Life' to mark its difference from the psychopathology of which Freud himself spoke. It is a philosophical re-reading of Freud's notion of the unconscious very much driven by the Nietzschean problematic of nihilism, transcribed by Santner as the problem of 'law in force without significance', that is, precisely the formalism we identified above. It is in this specific sense of an element in the thinking of a 'psycho-theology' that I shall suggest the unconscious has a bearing on the question of what it is that philosophical counsellors might need to bring into consideration when they address crises of meaning. On my argument this will include the unconscious, but not in the way that the unconscious is commonly understood, that is, as the site of unknown and unknowable drives, traces of a past which it would be the task of therapy to mould, domesticate, make liveable, or eradicate by bringing them to consciousness. Rather, I shall suggest, we might give an account of the unconscious which locates it on the terrain of Nietzsche's problematic of nihilism, one where the full and honest consciousness of the self-responsible self is less the issue than is the ability to be open to the enigma of that 'liminal' domain of the 'authorization', in excess of all content and pointing towards some transcendent authority which we attempt to invest with a foundational role in order to avoid the anxiety provoked by the ungrounded and the abyssal. On a Nietzschean account of the necessity of 'undergoing' this experience, the problem would be how to translate the transcendent reference implied by authority into a relation to exteriority; for to 'undergo' the transformation promised by the thought of eternal return is to experience desire as that which places one in the midst of life without narrowing this desire to the desire for a ground of *meaning* felt by one who would be, in lieu of God, a sovereign subject.

Eric Santner alerts us to the case of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber who suffered a 'breakdown' at the moment of his investiture as a high ranking authority in the judiciary, a crisis he himself interpreted as a crisis of meaning. Santner interprets the judge's 'breakdown' in relation to problems of authority and authorization, and these in turn to crises in the relation between validity and meaning. Schreber's 'breakdown' occurs as he gazes into the abyss of authority into which he is now required to step. Why, then, is it necessary to invoke the unconscious at this point?

The unconscious is interpreted by Santner (following a Lacanian reading of Freud) as the

psychophysical inscription of the procedures—and impasses—of symbolic investiture and legitimation, procedures that are bound up with the notion of sovereignty. The unconscious, in other words, forms the locus of psychic activity whereby a human being becomes a 'subject' by metabolizing its existential dependency on institutions that are in turn sustained by acts of foundation, preservation and augmentation. And by 'institution' I mean all sites that endow us with social recognition and intelligibility....

(Santner, 2001, p.26)

What is the unconscious on this interpretation? To put it in broad brush-strokes, it is the *liminal* domain of responsibility and authorization, a constitutive condition

of subjectivity that is disavowed by the fully conscious and responsible self. Such a self is one that seeks to 'close the gap' between command and obedience or between the 'external' and the 'internal' force of authority, through a process of rationalization integral to the notion of autonomy (that is, being oneself the source of the law one obeys). To relate this consideration back to our earlier reading of Nietzsche, we might approach the significance of the problem of meaning according to two alternatives, only the second of which invokes the unconscious:

- 1) There is no meaning 'out there', I have to make it myself. (Existentialist hero)

Versus

- 2) The experience of meaninglessness demands interrogation of how I take myself for a subject of meaning; placing emphasis on the interdependency of 'I' and 'thou' will lead to the question—how can I hold myself open to 'liminal' moments of authorization, to enigma and the abyssal?

Let me expand a little upon this second trajectory of thought.

The unconscious is an 'inner strangeness' which, according to the Lacanian theorist Jean Laplanche is constituted by 'the traumatic encounter with the dense, enigmatic presence of the Other's desire' (Santner, 2001, pp.33-4). In other words it is a function of (constitutive) relationship—relationship upon which the subject's very existence depends; a relationship that forms subjectivity, authorizing and legitimating that subject who will call him or herself 'I'. The capacity to say 'I' is thus formed through the address or request for response that issues from another. When the 'I' fully assumes the status of 'subject' (and thus of what is imagined to be a self-identical authority) it takes itself to be responsible *for itself* in a sense that disavows this relation to the other, covering over the 'strangeness' that persists at the heart of self. But when subjectivity suffers a crisis, the problematic character of constitutive dependency again comes to the fore. Santner's description of the 'subject of psychoanalysis' therefore invokes a subject suffering 'symptoms' of meaninglessness which demand interpretation in terms that relate what they are symptomatic of to all the ways in which we find ourselves 'inscribed' in symbolic orders or 'out of joint' with them, and variously attempting or failing to 'cover over' the gap that opens up at these points.

These modes of our inscription are said to be 'unconscious' insofar as they always remain outside the grasp of full cognitive apprehension. The question is, however, what sense we should give to this being 'out of grasp'? Again, it is helpful here to be guided by an open (enigmatic) versus closed (intelligible) articulation of the difference between unconscious and conscious life, rather than by the metaphor of surface versus depth. As an infant no less than as an adult one is, as Heidegger put it, 'thrown' into relations that are and remain irreducibly enigmatic. By 'enigma' here is intended the thought that one may be aware that something is meaningful without knowing *how* it is meaningful or what it signifies. Such is the situation of the pre-linguistic infant and, indeed, it is a condition of the possibility of learning language at all that this enigmatic sense of unfathomed meaning be present. The infant must be aware that there is a force to language prior to grasping the meaning of particular sounds. But such, too, is the situation of the individual in the nihilistic age who confronts enigma in the 'trace' left by the death of God.

The formalism that haunts the attempt to find substitutes for the replete moral universe in the authority of conscience, reason etc., must be referred to the attempt to raise the experience of authority to consciousness and thus to bring it into the order of intelligibility. In a crisis of meaning, conversely, the subject is returned to an enigmatic sense of imperative *force without significance* that can only further hollow out the life that bears it insofar as the degree of mastery the pre-cognitive infant does attain remains, in this case, ever out of reach. Even this comparison, however, may mislead us into thinking that is in principle possible to 'master' meaning. For the instance of language and its status is an important site of irreducible enigma, the mastery of which we tend to exaggerate, imagining that an exhaustive determination of meaning is possible. This, in a sense, is the central preoccupation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which never ceases to remind us of the enigmatic yet deeply compelling life of words. Here the lesson we must learn from Wittgenstein is that we fail to exhaustively determine the meaning of a word not because we ourselves lack a full comprehension which we may expect will come later, but because the meaning of a word is always 'structurally' incomplete, always open to the dimension where 'words fail' (Žižek, 1997, p.50). In this sense, too, there is in language a 'structural' unconscious, an opening onto enigma which unfolds in the gap between the *force* of the sense of the meaningful and the ultimately unapproachable question of *what* is meant.

Philosophy and the Cry of Abandonment

At least two questions might arise for a philosophical approach to counselling out of what has been said already.

- 1) How can philosophy engage—in distinctively 'philosophical' ways—with a crisis of meaning that has the kind of form described here, in which emphasis has shifted from what I earlier described as the heroic-existential problem of 'laying meaning into' an inherently meaningless world (that is, a problem of creating meaning through a kind of extreme self-reliance) towards a concern with 'enigma'? If enigma cannot by its very definition be cognitively grasped, then what are we to do with it at all? And how can this 'excess' that seems to drive the nihilistic world to demand meaning and seek substitutes for what it senses is lacking be either appreciated or become the means of some more fruitful transformation?
- 2) How can counselling practice which cultivates, amongst other things, a certain 'openness' towards a client take on an interpretation of itself which is sensitive to the difficulties introduced by supposing one's interlocutor to be a subject-with-an-unconscious—rather, that is, than being simply an individual with more or less confused ideas that might, with the help of philosophy, come to be clarified, thereby allowing rational self-determination to become the basis for a life?

On the first point Santner's account takes what he calls a 'theological' direction—but this is not a direction that for him would *exclude* philosophy. It is interesting to note that whereas Freud saw in the case of Judge Schreber a subject whose paranoid delusions were fantasmatic elaborations of a homosexual panic, Schreber

himself, aware that his crisis was a crisis of meaning, expressed the view that 'theologians and philosophers were better prepared to profit from his memoirs than the sort of neurologically and forensically trained psychiatrists who treated him' (Santner, 2001, p.46). Why and in what sense are philosophers to 'profit' from this case and perhaps have something to say in response to it?

Schreber's 'delusional' experience turned upon his sense that the world had been destroyed as a result of a profound imbalance between God and nature and he referred to his feeling of undergoing this experience as a 'soul murder'. The hypothesis that what Schreber found himself subject to here marked a crisis in subjectivity itself, an inability to 'assume' or 'metabolize' the symbolic investiture held out to him, as he was inducted into the office of *Senatspräsident*, allows us to consider how this confrontation with abyssal 'enigma' marks every performative moment of language. Authority is always in some sense 'magical', as is the performative which 'brings into being what it names' whilst also, implicitly, citing the previous and future instances of such an exercise of power. Again, one might say its force always exceeds its capacity to 'do' what it claims. There is then, on the one hand, a *surplus* here, a surplus of force over significance, whilst on the other, a *lack*, the lack of any ultimate foundation to sustain authority. Successful investiture with the mantle of authority requires what we saw Nietzsche describing in the passage above as a variety of substitutions, all of which are more or less effective in stabilizing this point of instability. Reason, conscience or the herd, all allow us to identify ourselves with the origin of authority, in a *closed* relationship that forswears exteriority. In other words, they allow us to reduce the anxiety of the enigmatic gap between commanding and obeying, speech and understanding, force and meaning.

If philosophy has anything to do or say here it is first of all called upon to bear witness to the sheer anguish of an experience like Schreber's. But is it not also called upon to do justice to the possibility that *this* is the difficult terrain on which we need to walk if we are to avoid *either* that conservative acceptance of substitutions for God's authority which hold us securely in our place in the symbolic universe or the assumption that the self-founded being of the existential hero would present an apt alternative? The collapse of what Santner refers to as 'the practical unity of life' leaves Schreber with the sense of profound *abandonment* (Santner, 2001, p.54). Can philosophy hope to offer a cure here—or only some means of recognition, some affinity with the crisis by which Schreber found himself wracked, some acknowledgement that the undergoing of this disaster bore conditions wider than the misadventure of a single man? How can philosophy hear and respond to the cry that resonates in Schreber's anguish: *Why hast thou forsaken me?*

Here, in the experience of abandonment which so often corresponds to the sense of meaninglessness, the existential hero would, perhaps, enjoin us to renounce our reliance upon this mysterious other and the implicit desire for redemption; to renounce the desire for a plenitude of meaning that must come from *without* in favour of resolute self-determination. Another response, however, more attuned to what is at stake here for the enigmatic borders of *all* authorization might seek, along with conventional psychoanalytic practice, a 'working through' of that abandonment implicit in *all* self-other relations. Abandonment in this sense does not signify some substantive lack of individual love, some personal trauma of the neglected self, nor the 'actual event' of the death of God; rather it

corresponds to the necessarily enigmatic question of the other's 'meaning' for which an analogue was previously found in the infant's pre-linguistic experience. Lacanian psychoanalysis puts this problem in terms of the nagging question of one's place in the Other's desire, that 'what do they want of me?' which intersects the experience of becoming a fully fledged interlocutory partner *via* a never-transcended unconscious trace of ungraspability.

It is possible to again find a Wittgensteinian parallel to this thought where in *The Philosophical Investigations* we see the plain language-games of ordinary interaction slowly excavated to reveal an insistent core of enigma which is miscast by philosophy as the enigma of that which is *hidden* and must be brought to light. One could argue that an engagement with the problem of the unconscious is figured in Wittgenstein's commentary upon the philosopher's desire to find a 'final analysis of our forms of language, and so a single completely resolved form of every expression'—and this, 'as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light' (Wittgenstein, 1981, 391). The mistake in reading Wittgenstein would be to imagine that with a turn to the everyday he exposes and denounces the illusion of 'depth' in favour of consciousness of the full adequacy of meaning to *use*, or that he 'shows the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' to re-enter a surface world where nothing in or about expression is enigmatic any more. For what such readings miss is the importance to the Wittgensteinian 'therapy' of holding open rather than closing off to a sense of difficulty. Philosophy may indeed be 'a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (Wittgenstein, 1981, #109). The seduction it battles, however, is one that is irreducible in that aspect of 'being in force without significance' that was earlier attested to as integral to authority and as the most elementary component of the experience of alterity as 'ungraspable'. The problem therefore becomes, as Stanley Cavell has eloquently argued in his readings of Wittgenstein, one of ardent negotiation with the sceptical impulse, now cast as the desire to reduce enigma *either* to the frightening possibility of unfathomable depth or to the equally frightening gesture of postulating that there is *nothing* there at all, that all is surface appearance (Cavell, 1979, 1995).

Contrast this sceptical impulse, then, in its desire for resolution, with a passage from Wittgenstein engaging with the enigmatic quality of the cry:

But here is the problem: a cry, which cannot be called a description, which is more primitive than any description, for all that it serves as a description of the inner life.

A cry is not a description. But there are transitions. And the words 'I am afraid' may approximate more or less than a cry. They may come quite close to this and also be far removed from it.

We surely do not always say someone is complaining because he says he is in pain. ... But if 'I am afraid' is not always a cry of complaint and yet sometimes is, then why should it always be a description of a state of mind?

(1981, II p.189)

What is a cry of abandonment? How should we 'read' it or respond to it? In the cry—'*Why has thou forsaken me?*'—our existentialist hero hears speak an inner state

of mind whose sense of enigma can be overcome. A cry which is cast as a description of an inner state of grief and loss is one, it is imagined, that might be dispelled through the realization that what it longs for simply lacks all existence. The surface form of language that cries for God is here contrasted with a deeper psychic truth. The one who cries is driven by the unconscious 'habit' of reneging on responsibility for positing his or her *own* goal and philosophy will serve to insist upon the *falseness* of the object taken by this habit. Acknowledgement of the *fact* that *there is no one there* at all becomes a means to the assumption of full self-responsibility. But notice Wittgenstein's riposte to this type of reduction when it serves to reduce the enigma of the cry. For him, the cry 'I am afraid' may *not even be* the description of a state of mind. Nor is it *simply* an expression, like an involuntary groan might be, for it is certainly articulated; 'I am afraid', may, Wittgenstein says, simply 'approximate' a cry, may 'come quite close to this and also be *far* removed from it'. Why, then, does Wittgenstein speak of the expression 'I am afraid' in this *enigmatic* way?—Does he perhaps seek to capture something of the liminal inarticulate life of words which in their force of expression exceed what can be contained within the interiority of a 'description of a state of mind'?

If the unconscious traverses the domain of linguistic intelligibility, as I have suggested we might read its effect, we must displace our understanding of its domain from what is 'hidden' in the forces that act upon the mind, towards a sense of its play in the excess of force over anything we can pin down as the contentful meaning language bears. As is the case with language in general for the pre-linguistic child, here the utterance 'I am afraid' grips us with a force in excess of its translatability into 'the description of a state of mind'. But what is the character of this excess? Wittgenstein at one point suggests that if we want to know what 'I am frightened' really means we must ask after its context (- as if 'context', as a 'surface' concept might appropriately displace the problematic 'depth' concept of intention). Yet this remark (1981, p.188) occurs only half way through the line of meditations that reach their culmination in the note previously cited and I take this to indicate at least some hesitation over the thesis so often attributed to Wittgenstein that the context of an utterance would serve to determine a meaning. The thought he dwells with towards the end of his ruminations would rather be that meaning is never fully determinable, that we are always driven towards its enigmatic quality. This reflection would follow in turn from the thought that even an apparently self-descriptive utterance like 'I am afraid' does not refer us only to a 'state of mind' but at once to what that mind encounters as other to itself. The cry of abandonment refers us to how 'being afraid' *inhabits* a body, and to those relationships between self and others that are mediated by the possibilities and the impasses of language. According to Cavell, to deny the unconscious life of the self is to deny embodiment, to deny the ways in which we find ourselves 'thrown' (1996, pp.104-6). Again, how can philosophy and the marriage of philosophy with a counselling process be true to such reflections?

Knowledge and Acknowledgement

On Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, the all important difference between scepticism and philosophy as re-interpreted above, can be rendered as the difference between 'knowledge' of another mind and 'acknowledgement'; the difference between

experiencing the mind—even one's own—as 'object' and experiencing another as making a *claim* upon me. The problem of how to acknowledge the 'enigma' of otherness rather than seeking to 'know' and cognitively master the other is precisely how Cavell specifies the dimensions of an *ethical* negotiation with scepticism—a negotiation that is never finally at an end, a promise that has to be repeatedly remade as 'acceptance' of the everyday takes on an 'eventual' character, that is, one riven by enigma rather than seeking to exclude it. And for Cavell, too, this difference might be said to have a theological dimension. For he writes: 'The withdrawals and approaches of God can be looked upon as tracing the history of our attempts to overtake and absorb acknowledgement by knowledge; God would be the name of that impossibility' (Cavell, 1995, p.347).

If the 'withdrawals and approaches of God' correspond in any way to the contemporary experience of a problem of meaning which has something of the form I have sketched above, then without being in a conventional sense 'theological' about it, it seems necessary to reject the existential hero's response to a crisis in this domain of life. For the existentialist hero derives too much from the faith that God is 'really' dead, that there is 'really' nothing there and thus that the grounds of external authority were falsely constraining grounds. In doing so he collapses acknowledgement of the inherent alterity of authority and authorization, into a knowledge of the mundane that must remain haunted by its other pole of sceptical possibility—a scenario in which not God but we are dead, our lives given over to the meaninglessness of the *non-eventual* everyday.

Echoing this invocation of fundamental questions of life and death, Santner writes:

The subject of psychoanalysis ... begins not with biological life but rather where biological life is amplified and disturbed by the symbolic dimension of relationality at the heart of which lie problems of authority and authorization. To borrow a term from Giorgio Agamben, we might say that the life that is of concern to psychoanalysis is *biopolitical* life, life that has been thrown by the enigma of its legitimacy, the question of its place and authorization within a meaningful order.

(2001, p.30)

'Biopolitical' life in the sense Santner uses it here, is life at once riven by the question of whether it is *really* alive and whether it is 'authorized' to exist at all. If this is the subject of psychoanalysis, how might it also be the concern of philosophy to speak to this moment and to this question? Running through all that I have said thus far is a challenge to the assumption sometimes made by philosophical counsellors that psychoanalysis offers a profoundly different process of engaging with a client's malaise of sense from anything that could be acceptable to philosophers. Although it is clearly the case that psychoanalysis has evolved in a number of directions, with competing schools of thought organizing different practical approaches to therapy, Santner's treatment of the unconscious and the bearing it has on problems of meaning allows us to identify a core of affinity between certain starting points of psychoanalytic thought and certain major strands of philosophy that begin in the late nineteenth century and carry

their questions and problems no less ripely into the twenty-first. It would be unduly dogmatic to seek to exclude these strands of reflection from philosophy and especially their bearing on how to interpret problems of meaning as well as, perhaps, offering some recourse for them. Philosophers might well need to learn something from psychoanalytic practice if the unconscious is to become something that counselling, at a minimum, acknowledges in the life of a client. And there are indeed rich resources of thought to be tapped here. Life 'thrown by the enigma of its legitimacy' seems to me a highly apt way to capture a certain experience of the loss of meaning, especially when we grasp the force of this question in relation to the question of what it means to be alive at all—to be *really* alive, not simply going through the repetitive motions, but really *living*. Again, the existentialist-heroic response to this problem would seem most readily to suggest the need to undertake some kind of adventure, to become 'heroic' through a direct confrontation with the risk of death. Yet Santner's approach allows us to delineate a different kind of response to a crisis of meaning, one which leads in a direction that engages with the problem of 'acknowledgement' that Cavell identified at once as at the heart of ethics and as forming the theological horizon of philosophical thought.

As we have seen, the implication Santner draws from his reading of the unconscious is that induction into a socio-symbolic order is not primarily a cognitive achievement and relation—it is not, for example, a matter of *mastering* a language—but is, rather, something that takes place in an important sense through an encounter with the 'enigma' of the 'otherness of the Other', the question of one's place within their desire. 'Our entire being', he writes, 'is in some sense permeated by making these enigmas by which we feel ourselves addressed—these scraps of *validity in excess of any meaning*—make sense' (2001, p.97). Hence the importance of intervening just *here*, somehow suspending the need to make sense, to translate demand into action, by refusing to allow an interpretation to become effective as part of a repetitive pattern of response. Hence, too, the importance placed by psychoanalysis on the centrality of the inter-relational constitution of self, which however, following Lacan, I have suggested must be broadened beyond any 'family romance' of the Oedipal adventure to comprise a consideration of our place within all linguistic interaction. It is central to the task of psychoanalysis to 're-enact' the relationships in play here in the effort to 'transfer' their force in a new direction. Yet it seems clear that on the whole philosophical counselling has tried to avoid this complexity of relation, as if pretending that we spoke together of 'neutrally' accessible topics, as though our dialogue were independent of the force of what takes place between us. But if meaning and knowledge of the other's meaning never quite float freely like this—and especially not where a *crisis* of meaning is being undergone—then philosophy must reflect further upon its own communicative conditions of possibility.

A first step, perhaps, would be to set acknowledgement before knowledge as a response to encounter with the other's enigmatic words, the other's crisis, or cry—'*why hast thou forsaken me*'; or '*I am afraid*'. To set acknowledgement first would imply forswearing any promise of 'cure' or of a 'cognitive therapy' for the anguish of existence. This surely must not, however, imply simply affirming the irreducibility or the value of such anguish *per se*. The question becomes, how is it possible to move at all within this space of encounter?—How to begin to turn anguish towards the kind of desire for life of which Nietzsche wrote? We can perhaps begin to address these questions by considering what as philosophers and

counsellors we are competent to do—what kind of resources we possess and how we *interpret* those resources. So one might perhaps ask, what is it to 'acknowledge' another and to hear what they have to say in this spirit of acknowledgement? And then—how would paying attention to this question shape philosophical counselling practice?

At the outset of any induction into counselling practice there is an important emphasis placed upon learning to listen. It is perhaps evidence of some of the claims made here about the enigmatic aspects of our inscription in language, that listening to what another person is saying, which we think of as something we do all the time, turns out to be something we are on the whole exceptionally bad at. Before having fully understood what someone else is saying we begin to argue with them. After resting our attention with the other for a couple of moments we turn the focus back to ourselves. It is as though in our ordinary interactions we did not want to be brought into a relation to exteriority though our exchanges, as though we tend naturally to seek either mastery of a communicative situation or to withdraw into ourselves. This phenomenon might be referred to the everyday attempt to 'manage' the enigmatic relation to others that takes place in language. Indeed, even if we place a certain interpretation on what we are doing in *trying* to really listen to the other we may *again* be trying to reduce enigma in the direction of knowledge and mastery rather than acknowledgment. For instance, if we suppose that at some 'deep' level the other really knows his or her own mind and it is our task in listening to excavate and make shared that hidden sense. Or if we suppose that what we are aiming to do through listening is to make possible the exchange of fully articulated opinions which might then be subjected to a rational scrutiny. Although I do not wish to deny that there is a place for both these gestures they nevertheless carry certain risks. For in either case we are seeking to restore a circuit of mutual intelligibility to the encounter and even if we do so with a view to *including* the other in that circuit (which otherwise risks being merely solipsistic) we must realize that we simultaneously bring to a close that interruption of the repetition of patterns of interpretation which requires a dwelling in enigma.

One wonders how much of what is commonly understood to be 'communication' takes place in this haze of indifference to the life and texture of language. For it is clearly possible to achieve a degree of understanding sufficient for what Habermas calls 'action-co-ordination', without worrying at all about the texture of the language we exchange; we ordinarily remain quite unbothered by all the complexity that Wittgenstein sought to draw attention to in focussing on the problem of the 'meaning' of a cry. What is it, then, that one seeks to learn in 'learning to listen'? And what has it to do with going beyond the merely 'everyday' towards the 'eventual' everyday—into a space where the only chance is that something might 'happen'. My intuition would be that although it may also be important to retain some of the defensive skills we are, for the most part masters of—and perhaps, *especially* as philosophers—listening must also be thought of as a kind of undergoing, a going down into an abyssal space of encounter. In my own experience, this undergoing when another is communicating a sense of meaninglessness is particularly hard to enter into and particularly difficult to endure (I draw here on my experience over several years as a volunteer counsellor at a Rape Crisis Centre as well as experiences with close friends). One becomes impatient to return to the ground where it is possible to ask questions at a level which presumes intelligibility—Why do you think that? Does that make sense?

What is it you want to achieve? But all the time that one is *able* or *compelled* to occupy the space of listening one is forced to share the abyssal sense of the untenability of such questions, the powerlessness of reason to draw either of you up out of this abyss. The counsellor is required, then, to endure an interruption in the circuits of intelligibility on a radical level, if he or she is to learn to listen not only to the conscious interlocutory partner of a dialogue but also to the subject-with-an-unconscious of an 'undergoing'. In sharing this space with another it is at least possible that something will happen through the very openness to a 'meaning' that remains enigmatic, irreducible to what one or the other anticipated finding.

What, then, of the specifically *philosophical* counsellor? At the outset of any induction into philosophy, there is an emphasis placed upon learning to reason, or as this is sometimes transcribed, to think critically. One is taught to isolate varying and mutually contradictory opinions and to hold them up for scrutiny. One learns to examine oneself and others in this way. One learns to always ask 'why?' and to discriminate between different kinds of questions that one might pose by asking 'why?' and hence different orders of appropriate answer. This kind of reasoning is the sort of skill one might seek to share with a client in a counselling practice which draws upon distinctively philosophical talents and it is indeed a very useful skill to bring to bear on certain purposes. But are there other aspects of philosophy that may do more justice to the abyss that opens where reasons seem to end? Nietzsche's commentary on the fate of philosophy in nihilistic times might be read as an engagement with this question. For Nietzsche, philosophy makes a deadly mistake when it seeks to *reduce* life to reason, as for instance he takes Socrates to have done when he 'saved' the Ancient Greeks from their pathological love of tragedy by introducing the philosophical practice of dialectics. Again, Socrates' error is characterized for Nietzsche by its adherence to a formula of closure "Reason = Virtue = Happiness" (1969, 'The Problem of Socrates'). This Socratic wisdom is one that any philosophical counsellor inspired by Nietzsche would have to avoid; for a 'vital' matter is not reducible to a 'why?' question and an enigmatic problem must resist reduction to the demand of consciousness for intelligibility. Moreover, to draw also here upon the reading Cavell develops of Wittgenstein's philosophy, the alterity of the other is not something we might seek to 'know' as though it were reducible to a set of propositions or opinions. The other as subject-with-an-unconscious is not only a 'stranger' to me but a stranger to him or herself.

There is a nice image that Žižek introduces here to bring out the 'negativity' or lack we must acknowledge at the heart of relationality—a lack we are always tempted to fill out, fill in, close over. In our efforts to understand another culture, he writes,

We should not focus on its specificity (on the peculiarity of 'their' customs etc.); we should rather endeavour to encircle that which eludes their grasp, the point at which the Other is itself dislocated, not bound by its 'specific context'. . . . I understand the Other when I become aware of how the very problem that was bothering me (the nature of the Other's secret) is already bothering the Other itself.

(1997, p.50)

Philosophical counselling might sometimes be thought of as requiring an 'encircling' of what eludes our grasp, and will do so to the end. The value of such 'encircling' gestures are perhaps manifest in Wittgenstein's treatment of the 'cry' and in any attempt to 'undergo' encounter with what cannot be clearly seen or mastered in oneself or others. These 'encircling' gestures are integral to certain moments of listening. In such ways we must acknowledge a place in philosophical counselling for a willingness to give together onto the enigmatic aspect which rational conversation, concerned with the exchange of points of view and cognitive mastery, by its very nature risks closing down.

The problem of acknowledgement is a problem about displacing the desire for certainty, curbing the desire for knowledge that would give one 'mastery' or would cover over the gap between speaking and understanding, commanding and obeying, force and meaning, by rationalizing the difference. Through acknowledgment of enigma, conversely, what is sought is an intervention into the problem of a life that risks being lead sceptically, given over to the meaninglessness that haunts the merely 'undead' existence. Being 'alive' requires a relation to exteriority that is foreclosed by the sceptic's desire for certainty. But equally it requires that the enigmatic excess of validity over meaning which may come to appear as an unbearable level of demand be transformed into a way of living that is an experience of desire—of having a goal and a way of being in time that neither refers to the radical interiority of the sovereign subject not to the impassive exteriority of sheer repetition in the mundane everyday.

Most philosophical counsellors would quite reasonably consider a case like that of Judge Daniel Schreber to lie outside their competence. Delusions of the sort he describes would seem to imply a danger to both himself and others around him that public responsibility demands a firm institutional response to. Philosophical counselling does not possess such an institutional framework as yet, nor does it as yet have any developed account of itself that would seem to make it equal to dealing with such difficult cases. Granted then that this would be an extreme case of the crisis of meaning, it remains that a philosopher informed by some of the considerations adduced here about the place of the unconscious in our sense of authorization, of our relation to meaning and our relation to others, might yet begin to engage with what Schreber described so vividly as a sense of abandonment, as living in a way that was not really alive but merely 'undead', as undergoing a 'soul-murder' that undid the very possibility of everyday life and its closed structure of repetition. To do so would require, however, that philosophy acknowledge its affinities not only with rational dialogue but with forms akin to what Nietzsche called the 'aesthetics of existence' and what Cavell speaks of as 'ethics', both conceptions of philosophy that enable it to accommodate acknowledgement of our rich and richly strange unconscious lives.

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