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## Psychoanalysis, Dignity, and Life: An Introduction

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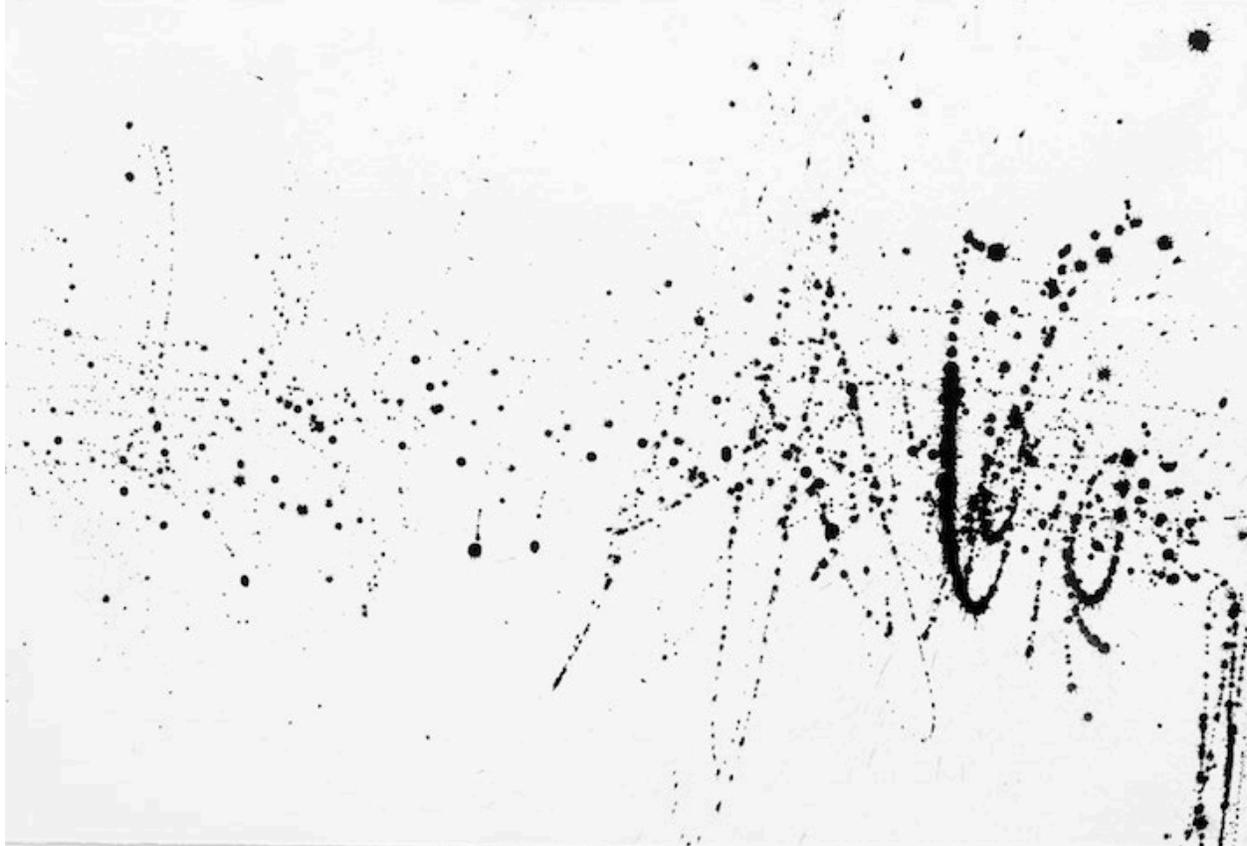
# An Introduction

by

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Attached Images:



Andrew Marcus. *Black On White, No. 5*, Sumi Ink on Paper, 15" x 22", 2017. All rights reserved

**Ellie Ragland's *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (U of IL, 1986)** introduced many of us to Dr. Lacan's work. Six years after Lacan's death, her ground-breaking study—the first substantive work in English—promised that something we did not know about (Lacanian psychoanalysis) was connected to something we thought we knew about (philosophy and its environs).

But *JLPP* delivered much more: an introduction to a teaching that—connected to a clinic and a school—sharpened over the course of Lacan's ongoing engagement and development of the Freudian legacy. Her journal, *The Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, showcased the work of those who continue to bring the Freudian Field to life: Jacques-Alain Miller, Pierre-Gilles Guéguen, Russell Grigg, Marie-Hélène Brousse, Alexandre Stevens, Bruce Fink, Slavoj Žižek, and many others. The *Newsletter* continues to do so with a new name (*Re-)Turn*. Professor

Ragland's other works include *Lacan and the Subject of Language* (1991, co-edited with Mark Bracher), *The Logic of Sexuation* (2004), *Lacan: Topologically Speaking* (2004, co-edited with Dragon Milovanovic), *Essays on the Pleasures of Death* (2013), *Jacques Lacan and the Logic of Structure* (2015).

The pieces archived here under the kind auspices of *MediaCommons* represent a conversation between Ellie and a group of her former students and their students who met last year in Norfolk, VA to celebrate Ellie's work. For some of us, it had been decades since we had the opportunity to work together, and the contributions reflect the different directions we've taken in our lives. We also made a new friend in Andrew Marcus—visual artist, dancer, and founder of the school of disappearance—whose drawings and artist's statement are included in this archive.

As diverse as the contributions may be in terms of subject matter, they all attempt to share something that we have heard while studying with Dr. Ragland. For this introduction, I've decided to call that something "Dignity," which I heard in Ellie's insistence that Lacan's work deserves to be studied, just as Lacan paid his respects to Freud. More than that, I heard that psychoanalysis has a project; Antigone, at the time, was one of my heroines. A strange thing to say, since there's more to life than a memorial or a proper burial. I also heard that psychoanalysis insists on the dignity of people (poor souls!) requiring that we learn to listen to the logic and ethics revealed in what others might count only as diagnostic categories (neurosis, psychosis, hysteria, perversion).

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Of course, psychoanalysis is not the only character at work in dignity's story.

**But Ellie's "Nature vs. Nurture" gives us a direction from which to start.** There are at least three bodies, she says: the real of the body (RB), which is not the same thing as the body as real (BR), and both of these can be distinguished from a body of knowledge (BK). We were left to consider what holds these three bodies together.

In the history of ideas, there hasn't been a shortage of candidates for that role. "Nature" and "Nurture" have certainly auditioned for the part. But, as the terms are put to work in Ellie's springboard for our discussion, nature ends up not being as intrinsic or universal as we might have thought, and nurture becomes anything but the royal road to some good that we might embrace as a universal project. What we call "Nature" operates within the Other's drama (the Symbolic), and the Real appears as the dimension ("Nurture") where every letter arrives at its destination, but only if its destination is located in the body (the Imaginary). So, our question reappears again: what holds together these three bodies (now christened as R, S, I)?

**"Morality" or moral-essence**, particularly the kind that can be so easily short-circuited by incivility, has also been offered as a candidate for the position of joiner. After all, if Ha-Shem (the name, the biblical creator of nature) had simply sent a note to Cain—acknowledging the latter's labor, there would be no discontents. If Cain (the biblical progenitor of culture) had simply sent a letter of appreciation thanking G/d for the knowledge that Cain's offering was unacceptable, there would be no civilization. Cain could have found another way to make (out) his place in the Other, and his note would still have arrived, as if it had been written on the body of the Other (as an essence—unacceptability thereby preceding the event of unacceptance). Well, then, essence is the answer! No, essence doesn't seem to work out either, as Plato reminds us in his *Euthyphro*. Are the gods' actions holy because the gods do them, or do the gods act in particular because the actions are holy?

The reference to Plato might take us a bit off course, since dignity, in terms of its history, has been associated less with the maker(s) than with what is made. Come and see. Here's a snapshot of dignity gleaned from Michael Rosen's lovely little book, *Dignity: its history and meaning*:

**1) Dignity as a noun**, a position in society or the world, rank or status. An example: Aquinas' treatment of dignity, in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, as the name for a created thing's goodness on account of what it is. Even Francis Bacon's apparently contradictory statement about dignity in his essay, "Of Great Place," would be an example: "The rising into of place is laborious, and by pains men come to greater pains; and it is sometimes base, and by indignities men come to dignities." The verbal dimension is wholly assumed under the name "indignities" with "dignities" being the place to which men might come.

**2) Dignity as a verb**, or action co-extensive with the exercise of liberty, as one sees in Kant's *Genealogy of Morals*, related to religion inasmuch as human beings were created to be free.

**3) Dignity as an adverb**, one acts in a dignified manner—dignity as it emerges from an aesthetics of life, as one sees in Schiller’s *On Grace and Dignity*, where dignity is associated with a tranquility in suffering—Laocoön being a principle example.

**4) Dignity as a passive verb**, being respected, as one sees in Article 3 of Convention III (the Geneva Conventions): “Persons taking no active part in the hostilities...shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria. To this end, the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned person... [among them] outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating, and degrading treatment.”

All four could easily accommodate the idea that dignity is a result of creation. The status-oriented definition of dignity (1) could be supported by the idea that everything has an inherent good because G/d created everything. G/d could have created human beings uniquely as rational beings who are free (2). That one might suffer gracefully (3) could be a response to some classic problems in theodicy.

Notice how context works in this series of dignities. The fourth example is particularly interesting in this regard. There is a context, but it’s not creation. It’s war, within which there is no (moral) context for treating “nonactive persons” inhumanely. This notion of dignity needs the adverb, “inhumanely,” which, in turn, is defined as suffering “adverse distinction.” Within this context, could we also say that active participants would be those who unfortunately but rightly suffer “adverse comparison”? A certain degree of impunity regarding “active participants” may well be connected to a distinction between war and other forms of violence and/or it may be produced by the assumption that the history of violence is not coterminous with the history of war. A common enough assumption. Just ask your friends how many of them studied violence as a school subject. Few, I suspect, would tell you that they had. Ask them if they have studied war, and the response will be quite different. But there is still something about “adverse comparison” and “adverse distinction” that sticks in the craw. Think of Yossarian’s exclamation in Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*; “They’re shooting at me. They’re trying to kill me.” And his friend’s response: “No, they’re not, Yossarian. They’re shooting at everybody.” “That’s what I said,” replies Yossarian. “They’re shooting at me. They’re trying to kill me.” While the all or everyone may serve someone, it’s related to a good that may not have a singular subject’s best interests in mind.

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What remains in the fourth example of dignity—even if we exclude the divine—is the notion that dignity is related to something inherent that persists and insists despite or beyond the vagaries of context (something generated by Kant's famous distinction between that which is an end in itself and that which is a means to an end). ...Not something created but something spontaneously generated, and here Kant shows himself to be one of the foci (Adam Smith is the other) for the Enlightenment's elliptical orbit:

In the Kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity. What is related to general human inclinations [*trieben*] and needs has a market price; that which, even without presupposing a need, conforms with a certain taste. That is, with a delight in the mere purposeless play of our mental powers has a fancy price; but that which constitutes the condition under which something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative value, that is a price, but an inner value, that is dignity.

Now, morality is the condition under which alone, a rational being can be an end in itself, since only through this is it possible to a law-giving member in the kingdom of ends. Hence morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity. (*Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals*, pp 42-43)

Example four also holds onto the idea of the human as the name for an imaginized dignity that can suffer gracefully (but not rightfully) somewhere between the symbolic and the real. For those who want to hold onto the idea of Man, the subject is no longer the home for morality; the object is. Take a look at the ECNH's paper on "The Dignity of Living Beings with regard to Plants: moral

consideration of plants for their own sake.” They’re driven by a Kantian engine (without using his name; they identify their approach as “commonsensical” and “intuitionist”). They’re asking how we can think (signifiers, don’t let us down, now!) a moral object that exists among many given that (1) our centrisms are mutually exclusive (they think) and (2) anthropocentrism is not an option, since (as noted in the report) anthropocentrism is merely a conceptual displacement of theocentrism. The document also provides ample opportunity for coding the four dignities listed above. It’s a beautiful essay, perhaps the first committee report ever to attain that status.

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**Timothy Richardson’s contribution points us in this direction:** Man has not gasped his last breath. Between the symbolic and the real stands Man-the-creator, the artist whose creation is woman. Not quite a body, not quite a signifier, this is the woman Tim finds in science fiction and fantasy. Ava from the film *Ex Machina*: “The difference is that Eva is also always obviously a machine. There is no confusion; Ava has been made.” Her: “Samantha has no body, and the absence of a body—this difference—is precisely what allows for the relationship. For Theodore, sex actually is masturbation with a partner, and works best when the desire at the other end is a mirror of his own.” And Man for Woman? Lacan writes in *Seminar XXIII*: “if a woman is a *sinthome* for any man, it is quite clear that another name needs to be found for what’s involved in man for a woman, since the *sinthome* is precisely characterized by non-equivalence. One can say that for woman, man is anything you please, specifically an affliction that is worse than a *sinthome*. A ravage even” (84 [English edition]/101 [French edition]). Perhaps, this idea (man as woman’s affliction) is also finding its engaging expression in films like *Lucy*, starring Scarlet Johansson, or the *Resident Evil* series.

Come to think of it. We may have been approaching the three-body question (what holds them together?) in the wrong way because, by the time we have our question, we are stuck in a representational field where everything that we talk about seems to operate as a signifier. That is, once we have one signifier we must have at least one more so we can speak about “the signifier”: “Which one (2) of the two (1)? Once we have accepted that, we might as well have another signifier since the subject is a third signifier (what a signifier is for another signifier): “Which one of the two?” you ask. “That one (3).” When bodies are treated as signifiers, the question of what connects three bodies isn’t much of a question, at least it’s a question that always produces the same answer—the signifier. If we treat R, S, I as signifiers, surely one of them will emerge from a representational field, which we can identify as the subject (nature vs. nurture?). If not the signifier, then what? The letter—understood apart from the signifier—understood as a hole in a representational field (sometimes written as a). What does a hole in a representational field look like? Plants, if you read the ECNH report—at least “plants” come to fill a hole so that we can pretend the hole is a signifier. But here’s another example: “3 Billboards Outside Ebbing, MO.” What better image of the hole into which Mildred Hayes is falling than the abandoned highway? The customary image of the hole is a doughnut or a circle, but take a line and spin it around. See what you get. This highway is a place where Mildred’s world (all that surrounds the road) is shaped by the intrusions of loss. It’s the place where Cain murdered his brother, and only G/d (or some part of the Other in Cain) could hear the scream of Abel’s blood (*damim*, plural in the Hebrew).

Where others (if they had looked) would have seen the fragments of advertisements for disposable diapers, Mildred Hayes speaks and transforms her speech into writing: “Raped while dying,” “Still no arrests?” “How come, Chief Willoughby?” The letter does have a place in the Other, but it is a hole. The letter is neither in nor out, either in or out of the Other’s compass. At the end of the film, the highway reappears, but it is unclear whether Dixon and Hayes are driving toward murder and/or justice. At least, the two of them have the trip to figure it out—and a fantasy appears to shape the Real: perhaps Dixon and Hayes can do this work together. The letter’s effect on the subject is the unconscious (understood as the discourse of the body), and the letter’s effect on the Other is that it puts the body in the Other’s place.

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**There are people who carefully cut parallel lines into their bodies. Are they making a space through which they can see and therefore extract the Other who stares**

**at them from within? Or is the aim more therapeutic, an attempt to create a real gap (a limit) between what they are feeling and the feelings that they can live with?**

It's now popular to talk about reading and/or writing the body or to speak about the rhetoric of the body—most notably in the space after the colon in dissertations about tattoos and body piercing. What if this much ado about the signifier is only part of the story? There are people who carefully cut parallel lines into their bodies. Are they making a space through which they can see and therefore extract the Other who stares at them from within? Or is the aim more therapeutic, an attempt to create a real gap (a limit) between what they are feeling and the feelings that they can live with? It depends on who we're talking about.... Certainly, there is science/technology enough to fabricate/alter a body before birth, and there is a market robust enough to put a price on it. But it may be precipitant to imagine that these fabrications/alterations are modes of invention and therefore party to a rhetoric of the body. Cutters, Eugenics, Medical Enhancement. If these are symptoms, what are we to do with these bodies, these vessels of joy fortified by the injunction to enjoy our suffering for a reason (*jouissance/jouis-sens*)?

As strange as it may sound, the Lacanian response to this question is to read these bodies. But before that, construct/write these bodies through the particular brand of transference supported in psychoanalytic discourse (speech) so that these bodies can be read. In lieu of the body as vessel, psychoanalysis creates the body as symptom and then creates a *sinthome*, an envelope for *jouissance*.

**Sara Cordell's "What is literature—a *sinthome*" presents one case for this.** Like literature, the *sinthome* is a creation. Like envelopes, literature and the *sinthome* appear as a fold that orients us in terms of an inside and an outside. Like folds and knots, literature and the *sinthome* require at least three dimensions. What separates symptoms from the *sinthome*? Symptoms are made of *jouissance*; the *sinthome* is the result of our separating *jouissance* from symptoms. No wonder that, when push comes to shove in hermeneutical work, we often ask "But did the author mean that?" In other words, does the *jouissance* embodied in our reading match the *jouissance* of the AUTHOR (understood as a bag of symptoms)? Who knows? But our reading might match the *jouissance* of the text (understood as the embodiment of a *jouissance* separated from the author's symptoms).

This separation of *jouissance* and symptoms has implications for our question, “What connects these three bodies?” The ego is willing to play the part of joiner inasmuch as one’s symptoms may be of some use. The answer may be the *sinthome*. It is! But this does not mean the *sinthome* is another body—although that may happen when the Name of the Father plants its flag in the newly discovered terrain of the symptom. Rather, the *sinthome* is a particular folding in space (a hole) that appears as and affords a knotting of the three bodies (as a name). In terms of the signifier, this folding (this *sinthome*) appears as channels in speech (a destined movement from one signifier to another) into which we stuff our little bit of string and in/out comes a semblance of order. Change the color of the string, its thickness, imagine that we’re working not with string but with a material that is a more likely representative for *jouissance* (chewing gum, let’s say), and we get the same result: chew until all the flavor is gone, then the real work (and the moral weight) of chewing begins. Since we distinguished between the letter and the signifier earlier, let’s ask, “How does this *sinthome*, this folding of symbolic space, appear in terms of the letter? The letter is still a hole in the realm of the signifier because the hole does not gift the envelope with its shape.

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**Jack Stone’s “Perpetual Translation Made Language’ and Beyond: From Signification to Sens”** helps us to move forward from this point by calling our attention to Borges’ fictional Quixote scholar, Pierre Menard, who wishes not to compose *another* Quixote but to compose *the* Quixote. Using some of our hard earned statements regarding the signifier, we can tease out the difference between *another* and *the*. Both “*another*” and “*the*” operate within the logic of the signifier discussed earlier. To have “another,” there needs to be at least two of something (two signifiers), but to have *the*, there needs to be a third that can play the part of the subject—*the* Quixote. Pierre Menard wants to compose the subject (*the* Quixote) but where does that leave him? If PM had lived in the seventeenth century, perhaps he would have been bombarded by the scenic forces that, after consuming Cervantes, left *the* Quixote in its wake (as if by necessity). If PM were immortal, then there would be time enough for him to be the instrument or witness of an infinite and random play of signifiers that, like a rather large slot machine, will produce the Quixote. But PM will not be consumed by the twentieth century nor by the seventeenth, nor will the play of signifiers inevitably produce it over time. The narrator imagines that the Quixote will simply stop not being written. What links these three modalities? There must be at least two Quixotes/signifiers (Cervantes’ and Menard’s). And the third? That one is reserved for Borges’ narrator who is so engaged by Menard’s project. For the narrator, what is unbearable is that, after Cervantes composed it, *the* Quixote does not stop not being written; it’s impossible to write it again. So, a new way to write must be developed. Jack Stone links this rendering of possibility, this new

way to write by stopping not to write, with the art of translation. This is interesting, since *Don Quixote* is often translated into Spanish. Take a look at an edition of *Don Quixote* prepared for Spanish language students; every third word is glossed (hopefully on the right-hand side of the page for ease of reading). Don Quixote's expression is inhabited by something foreign. In this writing, the presence of the Other fades (windmills translate into giants) and the Don Quixote emerges as James Joyce's signature (Joyce-the-sinthome) signs that there is no place—other than in Joyce's writing--for the Other to go. Better there than from the Real.

The Dignity of a Name.

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