If I refuse to take on the guilt, I implicitly blame the patient for the horror perpetuated by my colleague, and abandon the neighbor to die alone …” (p. 86). Blaming herself for another therapist’s mistreatment of her client feels severe—and unfair. I am also not clear why a guiltless clinician would be blaming the patient.

I find Levinas’ and Orange’s commitment to the needs of the other person inspiring, and, a profound critique of our taken-for-granted self-centeredness. But there is a danger here that Orange may miss. Levinas’ account of subjectivity is ethical, but ultimately self-neglectful: “For ethical thought … the self, as this primacy of what is mine, is hateful” (Levinas in Cohen, 1986, pp. 26–27). “I am hostage to the other, without self being,” writes Orange, describing Levinas’ ethical philosophy (p. 86). “As me, the face of the other calls me, demands from me, takes me hostage, persecutes me,” writes Orange (p. 83). “The other (Autri, the human other) presents me with an infinite demand for protection and care,” she continues. “You shall not allow me to die alone” (p. 80). I wish Orange had explored whether Levinas’ self-abnegating and self-effacing model of infinite ethical responsibility was his endless reparation for his imagined “crime” of not preventing his family’s demise.

Despite these questions and reservations, Thinking for Clinicians is a wonderful resource for mental health professionals and students and teachers of philosophy.

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Alexander Riley has written an erudite, scholarly and engaging book on play. Impure Play defines its subject as serious play that inhabits the sacred to the extent
that it transgresses and therefore limits the experience of the sacred. He writes that, “In the West ... impure sacrality and transgression are in danger of total disappearance .... Though impurity has been largely excised from the realm of religious practice and belief, this surgical removal has not yet successfully removed all its traces” (p. 14). Riley sees in disparate cultural manifestations of play, remnants or vestiges of the sacred surviving within the secular. The cultural activities under analysis are chosen for their transgressive aspects, onto which Riley systematically projects notions of the sacred and the tragic in an effort to dignify and situate these disturbances in the cultural field as inhabiting the realms of serious play. His subject matter is wide ranging and includes the novels of Michel Houellebecq, a French Writer and Filmmaker; gangsta gap and death/black metal; sports heroism and scandal; interactive video games and the online desequestration of suicide and death. Riley’s project of resurrecting notions of the sacred in these pop-cultural forms can seem both desperate and desperately belated, but provocative and intriguing at the same time. While he draws from an array of theorists, including Durkheim, Caillois, Baudrillard and Derrida, Riley makes only tangential allusions to psychoanalytic theory and nowhere uses it to engage seriously with his own theoretical project. I will offer to intervene and insert psychoanalysis into what I feel are the gaps, or inviting spaces in Riley’s text.

The first such invitation comes when Riley makes the observation that the *ludic* is not taken seriously in Western culture shaped by the ethic of a Calvinist Protestantism and the materialistic culture of late capitalism. He notes the lack of studies of play in the social sciences generally and in cultural studies particularly, where it would seem natural to locate the space of culture and the space of play as co-terminous in a very real sense. Both Freud and Winnicott did precisely this in two of their most important works: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Playing and Reality* (1971), respectively. One could claim that psychoanalysis has granted the most dignity to the child and to play. As objects both of theoretical speculation and clinical practice, forms of play and fantasy, both individual and cultural, have preoccupied and interested psychoanalytic writers from the beginning. Winnicott, for instance, precedes Derrida (cited by Riley) in his theorizing of the liminality of play, both in its developmental aspects and in the psychoanalytic dialogue. His concepts of the transitional object and the transitional space are attempts to situate the experience of play in the evolving delineation between self and object, inner and outer experience, the body and the environment, as well as the individual and her cultural surround. Winnicott’s (1971, pp. 95–103) chapter on “The Location of Cultural Experience” seems most apposite to Riley’s subject matter in that Winnicott is concerned, not just with forms or rituals of play, but with the individual’s ability to experience himself at play, and with distinguishing between creative play in the realm of the sacred and disturbed or pathological play, a distinction that is crucial to Riley’s project, as he, at several junctures struggles with the moral complexities of his categories. Winnicott (1971) writes:

The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience, which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences
creative living. By contrast, exploitation of this area leads to a pathological condition in which the individual is cluttered up with persecutory elements of which he has no means of ridding himself. (p. 103)

For Winnicott, the play space, or potential space, “opens out” into experiences and forms quite divergent in value, as well as in relative health or pathology. Riley stresses at several junctures the need to take the perspective of the individual experience of play and transgression into consideration without making blanket moral condemnation of the form of play itself. However, he seems to lack the theoretical tools to engage more fully with the experience of the individual and these are what psychoanalysis provides.

In his discussion of transgressive play, Riley makes the important point that in a secular society the linkage between the excesses of Carnival and religious observance are sundered, and the practices dispersed into a myriad of cultural forms which serve to disguise or displace the original religious impulse. It is his repeated claim that the essentially religious and sacred nature of these rituals is still operant and decipherable, that the ties to the sacred are retained. What he calls the “impure sacred” is intrinsic to his notions of serious, transgressive play, involving transient but ritualized and required assaults on hierarchy and the law, as in the excesses of Carnival as it ushers in Lent or in the temporary reveling in chaos typical of the aftermath of the death of monarchs. Most recently, in the film, The King’s Speech (2010), we see a small but significant example of this kind of transgression in Geoffrey Rush’s character’s laying down the law for King George at the beginning of their speech therapy sessions (which seemed to be versions of psychoanalysis, in fact), insisting that there would be no traditional respect of hierarchy and royalty in the time they spent together; this permission to transgress was not for Rush’s sake, but, in its very implementation, began to undo the constraints against speech, aggression and play that the King labored under and began a process of liberating play between the two of them that would not be possible if the usual protocols and courtesies were respected. Here we see that the space of psychoanalysis is a liminal or “liminoid” space, in Riley’s terms, created to contain transgression but also to make use of the transgression in the experience of the transference.

It is by the same token that Freud’s psychoanalysis was transgressive, but also “impurely sacred” in Riley’s sense, by situating sexuality in infancy and childhood and divorcing it completely from notions of teleology, whether biological as reproduction, or spiritual as courtly love. From his Three Essays on Sexuality (1905) and on to the end of his life, Freud insisted on the body in its hungers and needs, but always as subject to symbolization by culture and the individual. Freud’s audacious claims for the drives, for sexuality and the body in the life of the individual, the family and society have united any number of disparate groups in the singularity of the hatred and resistance his analysis provokes. Freud’s psychoanalysis sought to establish a hermeneutic horizon whereby practices like religious ritual and martyrdom and feelings like religious ecstasy and the “oceanic feelings” were not accepted a priori, as part of human nature or the jus gentium, but subjected to analysis as symptomatic acts and feelings. The disillusioning and demystifying effect of this analysis was both severe and compassionate, neither
conforming to nor rationalizing immorality, but bestowing a benign gaze on the drives and providing them a creative space in which to emerge into speech and representation.

Riley claims that the impure is not just a structural necessity for the pure, but is the condition of the experience of ek-stasis or ecstasy, “which is so crucial to the very humanness of human life” (p. 15). Furthermore, he equates this “experience of transcendence, of ek-stasis” with the sacred, itself. He justifies his exploration of what might be considered forms of “low” culture in a particularly evocative passage embedded in his discussion of the French writer and filmmaker, Michel Houellebecq’s novels. Riley states that Houellebecq’s “response is that high culture becomes necessary only because of the banality of our everyday lives. It becomes irrelevant if we learn to remystify the quotidian in the manner of the child who can pick four leaf clovers all day long without ever becoming bored.” Further, that “the anguished search for plenitude in the West has no hope of fulfillment because it rejects ‘the eternal, the imbecilic repetition of the same’ that children know” (p. 46; Riley citing Houellebecq here). This passage ushers in one of the two references to psychoanalysis in Riley’s text: Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of vulgar Freudianism made an Anti-Oedipe. In that important text, it is the normalizing of desire and its containment in the nuclear oedipal family of the West that provokes Deleuze’s and Guattari’s critique; thus, it would seem to be necessary to insert here the ways in which other readings of the Oedipus, some in response to Deleuze and Guattari, have since emerged in the psychoanalytic scene. But it also begs for a return to original texts for what may have been misread or gone unread in what they rightly saw as the retrograde movement of Freudianism in mid-century.

Riley is both aware of and somewhat dismissive of conventional moral claims as he engages with transgressive forms of culture, and one can distinguish this moral set aside from Freud’s. The Freudian bad news was that we are essentially not good but needy and driven, that sublimation and cultural achievement are made at a price to the individual that is too much to bear and so, we are neurotic. The lifting of repression, in an act of speech, had the effect of liberating a quotient of energy in the individual that could be put to work in other endeavors. Morality moves into the realm of choice more than in the realm of compulsion. The individual, aware of the extent and influence of his own unconscious knowledge becomes, ideally at least, in a position to choose and in a more compassionate position with regard to his fellow beings. The consulting room itself becomes a carnivalesque site of transgression and the impure sacred, in Riley’s terms, but, crucially, a site of transformation away from compulsion toward freedom; away from moral compulsion and toward ethical choice. As subsequent psychoanalytic and cultural theorists, including Foucault, have noted, it is the transference, in as much as it realizes or actualizes the site of the unconscious in the psychoanalytic dialectic that introduces the possibility of psychoanalysis as an ethical discourse. When rituals of sacred transgression are played out in the public sphere, however, it seems insufficient to understand them strictly as secular, although formal manifestations of the impure sacred. What is missing, precisely, is individual insight and choice predicated on the personal experience of unconscious determination. It seems to matter more to Riley’s analysis that modern culture can be seen to be
re-inhabiting ritual forms—in disparate manifestations like gangsta rap, death metal, celebrity sports and violent video games—than that these are also sites of racism, homophobia, misogyny and murder. At times, Riley’s zeal for his subject and his methodology does not allow him to come to terms with real transgressions against others, but often to dismiss them as merely moralistic quibbles from the political Right or the Left, or from fundamentalist religion.

The practice of psychoanalysis is, by happy coincidence, an example of what Riley defines as the intellectual project of cultural sociology:

It is itself inevitably rooted in human life and the human search for meaning. It constitutes a response to that most profound of human thirsts, the thirst for meaning, and it seeks to quench it through an inner life discipline and a daily askesis that produces knowledge, available then for presentation to others, that nonetheless has its inevitable first manifestations in the life and experience of the knower. (p. 171)

Add to this something about the unconscious status of knowledge and the epistemology of the transference, and this passage is as eloquent a description of the praxis of psychoanalysis as Lacan’s (2006). What Riley affirms in his methodology is a cultural sociology that calls the reader to consider the crystalline structures of the sacred mythologies that repeat from culture to culture both synchronically and diachronically. This project invokes, for a psychoanalyst, similar projects, which have attempted to situate the individual both in the context of her larger cultural surround and in a historical dimension as well. What else is the Oedipus complex but just such a project? Why, in a cultural–sociological study of the seriousness of play, does psychoanalysis get such short shrift? Why, at so many junctures where it seems natural, if not crucial that one would bring in important psychoanalytical thinking and thinkers into the playroom, are they left out?

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