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## The Origin of Certainty in Lacan's Seminar XI

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*I would like to dedicate this essay to the Rochester Lacanian Cartel, including, among others, Ted Lechman, Antonio Garcia (the organizer of the 2012 conference for the International Journal of Žižek Studies), David White of St. John Fisher College, and our "Plus One," Dan Collins. Portions of this essay first appeared in my posts to our on-line discussions, and the essay would have been impossible were it not for the significant insight of all of these participants, both in person and over the internet.*

"...The heart of the problem that I am raising," Lacan tells us in the fourth session of Seminar XI, is the following question: "Is psycho-analysis, here and now, a science?" (Lacan 1973: 47) Of course, Lacan never quite gets around to answering that question, but much can be gleaned from the Seminar by contextualizing it within the larger structuralist "revolution" against existential phenomenology.

Linguistics, in continental Europe, along with its scientific branch typical of Anglo-American linguistics, also includes a structuralist tradition, and more than its empiricist cousin, this structuralism is rooted in a development of intellectual trends from the nineteenth century. We might say that in England and the United States, linguistics is the study of language, while in the continental European tradition, linguistics is the study of *nothing but* language. In Medieval Europe, theology had been "queen of the sciences" and the academy was free to extend the play of its thought to every end of the cosmos; after the coming of Kant and the critical philosophy, philosophers were restricted from making pronouncements concerning the noumenal, transcendent realm, and were confined to a sphere with very strict limits (and metaphysics, in so far as it existed at all, was largely reduced to describing and enforcing these limits). As the years progressed, the "space" of thought was reduced further and further still, until we reached the era of structuralism,

when philosophy was reduced to the boundaries of language alone. To put it differently, the subject was no longer free even to move about through the severely circumscribed domain of the phenomena; the boundaries of the knowable had retreated within the subject itself, and now divided itself from itself.

If we are to understand how structuralism's revolution against phenomenology happened, the first question to be asked is: what was it about phenomenology that should make a structuralist like Lacan revolt against it? To answer this question, we must take a closer look at the relation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, particularly in the thought of Heidegger and Sartre. In short, I will argue that this famous Seminar, concerning and elaborating Lacan's theory of the split between the eye and the gaze, has the purpose of rescuing psychoanalysis from its phenomenological critics. Toward this end, Lacan proposes a previously unknown pivot-point on which to found certainty, and it is upon this pivot that writers such as Slavoj Žižek establish their work.

Heidegger was, at best, apathetic towards psychoanalysis, and sometimes insultingly dismissive of it (and even, on occasion, of Lacan in particular), never bothering to write about it at any length. The closest thing we have to a Heideggerian work on psychoanalysis comes from some notes from a seminar he was asked to give to psychiatrists in training at the behest of his psychoanalyst friend, Medard Boss (Heidegger 1959-69). According to Boss, Heidegger's opinion concerning Freud was that he "couldn't believe that such an intelligent man could write such stupid things, such fantastical things, about men and women" (Richardson 2003:4). In these lectures, Heidegger places Freud in a history of science that begins with Descartes's division of subject and object, claims that Freud sought an unbroken chain of causality beginning in the subject to explain human behavior, and when this failed, hypothesized the unconscious as a kind of dark underside to the Cartesian subject. (Heidegger, 2001: 7) Beyond this, he has little to say.

Sartre, on the other hand, was more explicit, and directly attacked psychoanalysis in writing, for instance in Section II of his "Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions" (Sartre 1939). For (the young) Sartre, of course, we are all "condemned to be free," and any supposed knowledge that obscures or denies this absolute freedom and absolute responsibility is bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). We are therefore fully in control of, and responsible for, our emotions, and to pretend that we are in any way "unconscious" of the origin of emotional impulses is ultimately nothing but dishonesty. In this regard, then, psychoanalysis is as bad as religion:

Can we admit that a fact of consciousness could be like a thing in relation to its signification -that is, receive its meaning from outside like an external

quality- as, for instance, this having been burnt by men who wanted to warm themselves is a quality external to the burnt wood? It would seem, first and foremost, that the effect of such an interpretation is to make consciousness into a thing in relation to what is signified: it is to admit that consciousness can constitute itself into a meaning without being aware of the meaning that it constitutes. There is a flagrant contradiction in this, unless we are to regard consciousness as an existent of the same type as a stone, or a pond. But in that case we must finally give up the Cartesian cogito and treat consciousness as a secondary and passive phenomenon. In so far as a consciousness makes itself it is never anything other than what it appears to be. If, then, it has a signification, it must contain this within itself as a structure of consciousness. This does not mean that the signification must be perfectly explicit. There are many possible degrees of condensation and of clarity. It only means that we should not interrogate consciousness from outside, as one would study the remains of the fire or the encampment, but from within; that we should look into it for the signification. The consciousness, if the cogito is to be possible, is itself the fact, the signification and what is signified. (Sartre 1939:4)

For “the fact, the signification, and what is signified,” we might substitute the words “the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary.” Notice Sartre’s use of the term “thing,” which Lacan will make such a theme of his teaching. Also, Sartre, by bringing up “burnt wood,” is evoking the well-known passage from Descartes’ First Meditation (which Foucault would later echo with his “My Body, This Paper, This Fire” (Foucault 1972/2006: 550-574)) (Descartes 1641: unpaginated):

But it may be said, perhaps, that, although the senses occasionally mislead us respecting minute objects, and such as are so far removed from us as to be beyond the reach of close observation, there are yet many other of their informations (presentations), of the truth of which it is manifestly impossible to doubt; as for example, that I am in this place, seated by the fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown, that I hold in my hands this piece of paper, with other intimations of the same nature.

The first thing to note is that, although these objections may seem similar, Heidegger and Sartre oppose Freud for completely opposite reasons. To (over)simplify, Heidegger objects to the crude Cartesianism of Freud; whereas, for Sartre, Freud isn't Cartesian enough. In any case, it's fairly safe to assume that Lacan, in 1964, having just been "excommunicated" from the psychoanalytic community, and for the first time addressing an audience that is to a large extent filled with philosophy students and not merely psychoanalysts in training, would attempt in some way to defend psychoanalysis from its phenomenological critics (whose influence was still intensely felt in the Parisian academic world).

And indeed, at the beginning of the fifth lecture of Seminar XI, Lacan responds to the charge that psychoanalysis is an "idealism" - that "it reduces the experience, [as] some say, that

urges us to find in the hard supports of conflict, struggle, even of the exploitation of man by man, the reasons for our deficiencies - it leads to an ontology of the tendencies, which it regards as primitive, internal, already given by the condition of the subject." (Lacan 1974: 53) The first part of this sounds like a quasi-Marxist argument against psychoanalysis, and the second part sounds like an amalgam of Heidegger and Sartre's arguments against it - with a cutting, ironic twist at the end, since these words in an attack on Freud's thought ("the condition of the subject") could equally apply to Sartre's own ideas. After all, the typical knee-jerk Marxoid charge made against Sartre (and other "bourgeois academics" such as Hannah Arendt) is that he has an essentially ahistorical conception of the "human condition," undetermined by socioeconomic structures. On the other hand, of course, this very human condition that Sartre posits is one of nothing but absolute freedom - there is no given essence of human life for Sartre - and therefore there is no obstacle to revolutionary change; humanity is fully, freely historical. This gives us a hint as to how Lacan will proceed in his argument, pushing Sartre's own argument against itself until it explodes and resolves into something new.

An "ontology of the tendencies": this means that from a Sartrean anti-psychoanalytic stance, we cannot praise or blame "forces" for determining our own freely chosen actions - what is called a force, from this perspective, is merely the tendency of a subject to freely choose the same action, again and again and again. At each and every moment, the subject could choose differently, just as, for the Sufis, each and every moment God recreates the universe, and he just happens to choose, out of the infinite possibilities of his freedom, to create a moment that sequentially follows the previous one. For the Sartrean, the human subject has just the same kind of infinite freedom and infinite responsibility that is (incorrectly) reserved for God, and therefore the psychoanalyst ascribes a mode of being to these tendencies that ill-befits them, as one might confuse the *vorhanden* mode of being for the *zuhanden*.

In any case, Lacan quite obviously thinks that these quasi-Marxist arguments against psychoanalysis are wrongheaded. (I insist on saying "quasi-Marxist" rather than simply "Marxist" because this critique of "idealism" lacks all of the philosophical subtlety that Marx himself would have employed in the use of this term.) Lacan defends psychoanalysis here, insisting that, far from being an idealism, it is only psychoanalysis (or something very much like psychoanalysis) that is pointed in the direction of the Real. "No praxis is more oriented towards... the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis." (Lacan 1974: 53) It might be added that Lacan gives us hints what this something-very-much-like-psychoanalysis might be when he brings up "gods" in a passage that, except for its lighthearted and humorous tone, could otherwise remind one of the later Heidegger texts concerning "gods": "The gods belong to the field of the real." (Lacan 1974: 45)

What Lacan realized here is that Sartre's phenomenological complaint is in essence directed against empiricism, and that if psychoanalysis is to survive Sartre's withering attack, then it could not be psychoanalysis as an empirical science. Lacan is therefore at pains to distance psychoanalysis from empiricism, and from the Anglo-American analytic tradition (a rather distorted version of which existed at the time as Ego Psychology, which emphasized a rather pat and unproblematic notion of "reality" and the conflict-free ego's ability under what Heinz Hartmann called "an average expectable environment" to adapt to this reality, through techniques such as reality testing, impulse control, and object relations (Hartmann, 1939)). Here Lacan simultaneously makes two different arguments, seemingly in two different directions, though they turn out to be quite interwoven and together form the basis of his teaching.

Argument #1: Lacan tacitly concedes to Sartre that, at first glance, psychoanalysis looks like idealism - and further, that a certain traditional interpretation of psychoanalysis really does treat consciousness as an "existent" like a "stone, or a pond," as Sartre would have it. This archaic Freudian interpretation of the unconscious is the "dynamic" model of the unconscious, or as it is sometimes more humorously known, the "hydraulic" model of the unconscious, in which several quasi-physical forces push against each other in a kind of internal mental plumbing; for the structuralist, this model has to be abandoned. In Lacan's re-interpretation, drives are not internal, mechanistic, bodily forces but rather the (mental) representations of these forces; thus far, he is technically an orthodox Freudian. But in repudiating the dynamic model, Lacan goes so far as even to distance himself from Freud - thus the chapter heading, "The Freudian Unconscious and Ours." In a limited sense, Lacan is quietly accepting Sartre's indictment and distancing himself from that to which Sartre objects in the Freudian reading of the unconscious. But Lacan insists that there is, nonetheless, a kernel of the real to which psychoanalysis is oriented, and which Sartre misses.

In order to defend psychoanalysis, Lacan is forced to utterly transform his (and our) understanding of what psychoanalysis is, and what psychoanalysis studies, namely, the unconscious. Sartre himself gives us a clue when he says that if consciousness "has a signification, it must contain this within itself as a structure of consciousness." Rather than posing as a practitioner of the Anglo-American scientific method, and looking for a natural explanation of human behavior, Lacan leaves nature out of his confession and seeks instead a structural description. And structural descriptions of phenomena have a fine pedigree from the perspective of phenomenology - although Heidegger is seldom thought of as a structuralist, in a sense perhaps he sometimes was, for instance when he wrote of uncovering the *existentiell* structures of being-in-the-world, the structure of *Dasein*, and so on. And this can be seen as occurring at the level of

language alone, for in his later writings Heidegger declares that "Language... is the house of the truth of being." (Heidegger 1947: 223). An even more direct link between phenomenology and structuralism is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to whose work Lacan repeatedly refers, at length. Lacan refers to Merleau-Ponty as a "friend." (Lacan 1973: 71) It is perhaps possible, then, that he could have known of the (at that point, still unpublished) work that Merleau-Ponty was just beginning to draft in his final days, namely "The Prose of the World," (Merleau-Ponty 1973) which makes a breathtaking leap into proto-structuralist argumentation, anticipating the general direction of French thought for a generation (though Merleau-Ponty could be at times quite dismissive of structuralism as it had existed in his own time). In any case, this is the cause that Lacan takes up, examining the workings of signification in the structure of consciousness, and coming to the conclusion that "the unconscious is structured like a language."

Notice what the above assumption does to Sartre's argument. Lacan has avoided Sartre's condemnation of psychoanalysis, that it disavows freedom and, by blaming everything on opaque forces, which do not avail themselves of language, treats these aspects of consciousness like a stone or a pond. But what a price Lacan has paid to "win" this argument! Lacan has not really disproven or even contradicted Sartre's fundamental assertion, that psychoanalysis renders the human subject as a slave to "blind" drives - rather, at this stage of the argument, Lacan has merely exchanged one form of blindness for another, much more serious kind. The drives, for Lacan, should not be mistaken for natural, dynamic forces, but they do have, so to speak, a grammar, and are thus rule-bound in something like the linguistic sense. Now that they are structures of language, these entities that were once conceived of as blind forces now yield to a kind of consciousness, but that consciousness is itself divided, and the subject must henceforth be considered split. Psychoanalysis, as long as it purported to be an empirical science, may have threatened the existential freedom of the subject, but psychoanalysis as a structural analysis, which apprehends the unconscious as something structured like a language, does not even afford the subject the dignity of being oppressed.

Lacan is, in effect, saying, "Okay, Sartre - I grant you your wish: consciousness, in this interpretation, is nothing other than what it appears to be - it is the fact, the signification, and what is signified, all at once." But - so much the worse for existentialism, and for existential freedom! The result is a never-ending paradox that will gnaw at us forever. If there really is nothing distinguishing the fact of consciousness and its signification, then there is nothing left over when the subject is determined by and through and in language, no "inner me" to resist being thus controlled, or even to feel a sorrow or incompleteness (lack of fulfillment) in this predicament - the "inner me," to the extent that it exists, is, itself, precisely what is produced by language (as

opposed to the body). But... (but!) some anxiety, some *Angst*, somehow persists, which in itself, serves to show that something is missing in this formulation. What is it that is missing? Precisely, *nothing* - the very same nothing that separates the fact of consciousness from its signification, the same little nothing that is left over when the subject receives its name, and when the subject articulates itself (for this reason Lacan needs to detail the relation between the subject of enunciation and the subject that is enunciated).

Thus, in responding to Sartre's contention that treating consciousness like a "thing" means that we "must finally give up the Cartesian *cogito* and treat consciousness as a secondary and passive phenomenon," Lacan's somewhat surprising retort is that we must choose the *worst* of both worlds: we must insist on the Cartesian *cogito*, *and* we must treat consciousness as a secondary and passive phenomenon. We might conclude that the triumph of the structuralist camp over phenomenology, at least in its Sartrean form, is a pyrrhic victory at best. To understand why Lacan chooses the worst of both, we must now return to our discussion of Heidegger.

For a few years now, Slavoj Žižek has been teasing out and bringing into stark contrast the argument that Lacan and his epigones have been making against the Heidegger tradition. For Heidegger, the distinction between the ontic (*ontisch*) and the ontological (*ontologisch*) is, of course, fundamentally necessary, and, turning away from the ontic (the "plain facts," so to speak, the type of information that is gleaned from sciences like chemistry and biology, facts about specific, discrete beings rather than being itself) Heidegger instead focuses his attention precisely on the ontological (the study of being as it is disclosed in a historical epoch). But this is not because he considered the matter of the ontic to be closed, but, just the opposite, because he wished to leave it radically open (in this way, he wished to be a "shepherd of being," protecting it). As Žižek puts it (Žižek, 2012, 196):

Heidegger leaves open what one might call the ontic question: there are obscure hints all through his work of a 'reality' which persists prior to its ontological disclosure. That is to say, Heidegger in no way equates the epochal disclosure of Being with any kind of 'creation' - he repeatedly concedes as an unproblematic fact that, even prior to the epochal disclosure or outside it, things somehow 'are' (persist) out there, although they do not yet 'exist' in the full sense of being disclosed 'as such,' as part of a historical world.

Žižek goes on to describe this "ontic persistence outside of ontological disclosure" and notes that "Lacan's *prima facie* weird decision to stick to the term 'subject' in spite of Heidegger's well-known critique of subjectivity is grounded precisely in this obscure excess of the ontic over its ontological disclosure: 'subject' is for Lacan not the self-present autonomous agent reducing the whole of

reality to its object, but a pathetic subject, that which suffers, which pays the price for being the site of the ontological disclosure in ontic flesh - the price whose Freudian name is, of course, "castration." (Žižek 2012, 196) The subject has been preserved, but only through and as a horrific and haunting Thing.

What are we to make of Lacan's subject that, though a subject, is nonetheless a secondary phenomenon, this pathetic subject, which is "subjected" to a brute Real of its own desire? Doesn't the very idea of this passivity seem to imply a loss of agency, a loss of the subjectivity of experience, of subjectivity itself? Žižek proposes a way of understanding this, and in the process proposes a whole new phenomenology - that is, as he puts it, "a New Science of Appearances," which Žižek employs in the analysis of fantasy. The key here is what Žižek calls "the paradoxical pseudo-autonomy and efficiency of the 'illusion,' of illusory appearance, itself." He explains Freud's breakthrough thus (Žižek 2006: 170):

...The ontological paradox, even scandal, of the notion of fantasy lies in the fact that it subverts the standard opposition of "subjective" and "objective": of course fantasy is by definition not "objective" (in the naive sense of "existing independently of the subject's perceptions"); however, it is not "subjective" (in the sense of being reducible to the subject's consciously experienced intuitions either). Fantasy, rather, belongs to the "bizarre category of the objectively subjective - the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you" (as Dennett put it in his acerbic critical remark against the notion of qualia [direct immediate sensations]). When, for example, we claim that someone who is consciously well-disposed toward Jews nonetheless harbors profound anti-Semitic prejudices of which he is not consciously aware, are we not claiming that (insofar as these prejudices do not reflect the way Jews really are, but the way they appear to him) he is not aware of how Jews really seem to him?

Žižek goes on to compare (as "strictly analogous") this Freudian analysis of fantasy with Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, in which Marx uses the phrase "objectively necessary appearance," and then continues with an exegesis of Lacan: "This is also one way of specifying the meaning of Lacan's assertion of the subject's constitutive "decenterment": its point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by the objective unconscious mechanisms which are "decentered" with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but, rather, something much more unsettling - I am deprived of even my most intimate "subjective" experience, the way things "really seem to me," that of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being...." Going even further, Žižek finally completes this anti-empiricist psychoanalysis by asserting that there is nothing objective about the Unconscious - that the Unconscious is, itself, nothing but a phenomenon, an appearance - and yet,



paradox of all paradoxes, it is a *phenomenon we cannot experience*: “At its most radical, the Unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanism that regulates my phenomenal experience.” (Žižek 2006: 171)

Argument #2: Lacan's second argument against the phenomenological critics of psychoanalysis is far more subtle than the first, though it follows directly from the first. Whereas the first argument began with a concession to Sartre, yet ended by disagreeing with him, the second argument works in the opposite direction, starting with a frontal assault on Sartre's phenomenological assumptions, and then, perhaps, subtly, turning out to agree with them. In fact, this argument is so subtle that the only way to explicate this argument is by first intentionally misinterpreting it, and then going back and correcting this misinterpretation, until it comes close to something more accurate. So the following is a misunderstanding of Lacan's argument #2 against the phenomenological critics of psychoanalysis, which I would call the “deconstructive reading.”

Let's begin again with the quote from Sartre at the beginning of this discussion. Towards the end of the paragraph, it reads: "...[W]e should not interrogate consciousness from outside, as one would study the remains of the fire or the encampment, but from within; [...] we should look into it for the signification. The consciousness, if the cogito is to be possible, is itself the fact, the signification and what is signified." Lacan (let us say) takes direct aim at this, which, in his view, is wrong on both counts. First of all, the psychoanalyst definitely *should* interrogate consciousness from outside. And this is not a Levinasian "face to face" encounter that Lacan is proposing, but rather a strictly asymmetrical relationship, in which one person is the analyst and the other is the analysand. (He even emphasizes the fact that the analyst and analysand should not face each other but rather the analyst should be behind the analysand, to see and not to be seen (Lacan 1973: 77).)

More importantly, Sartre is wrong on the second count, that if the cogito is to be possible, consciousness is the fact, the signification, and what is signified - in other words, what Sartre has in mind here is absolute apodicticity, pure apperception, in which consciousness coincides fully with itself. It is this conception of humanity (which we might call existential humanism) to which Lacan stands fully opposed. For Lacan, consciousness never coincides fully with itself; there is always a gap - and Lacan's name for this gap is the unconscious.

Note that in this interpretation, the gap of the unconscious is purely formal. It is simply a placeholder. One shouldn't look for it, for instance, in the brain - that would be to naturalize it, to give it a natural explanation rather than structural analysis. If you're looking for the Unconscious in the brain, you won't find anything there - or even a lack of anything there. That's why Lacan says that the ontic status of the Unconscious is neither being nor non-being. It's a placeholder, like a

space between words in a text. It represents the failure of the self-adequation of consciousness, the failure of consciousness to be self-identical; it is a representation of the failure of representation. This is another sense in which the Unconscious is structured like a language - perhaps more pointedly we could say that the unconscious is structured like an absence of language, but an absence that is structurally necessary for the language to function.

But simply to deny is not to argue. How can Lacan bolster this argument against Sartrean humanism? Before we get into the details of his argument, let's notice that Lacan is in good company here. Many on the French intellectual scene were already complaining that Sartre had misinterpreted Heidegger, along Cartesian lines, and that Heidegger's Being and Time was in essence a deconstruction of Husserl's Cartesianism. Heidegger himself weighed in with his "Letter on Humanism," (Heidegger 1947) which simply demolished Sartrean humanism (which had been expressed the year before, at least in a cursory sense, in Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" (Sartre 1946)). In addition to this, the Sartrean universal subject had also been attacked, even more directly, in the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's work, "The Savage Mind" (Levi-Strauss 1962 - 2 years before Seminar XI). Levi-Strauss was in many ways the founder of the wave of structuralism that swept French academia in the mid-20th century, and he was Lacan's good friend, in attendance during Seminar XI, and Lacan refers directly (though briefly) to his work.

The urge to subvert the autonomy and self-identity of the subject was very much in the air during this time. It would be easy to put Lacan in a history of ever-intensifying philosophical focus on non-identity, by whatever term one chooses to name it: the gap, difference (not only the difference which is the fundamental unit of Saussurean structuralism, but also as in Deleuze's "Difference and Repetition," in which he attempts to ground philosophy not on being, but upon difference), discontinuity ("discontinuity exists, and a good thing, too!" - said famously and somewhat sarcastically by Foucault, mocking those who reduce his argument to this alone), "*differance*" (Derrida's neologism), and so on. Add to this list Nietzsche, who dismissed humanism as being, so to speak, religion in disguise, in which the human is placed in the same position that God once occupied, and the fundamental antagonisms and contradictions that this implies are smoothed over as if they didn't exist. Nietzsche loved humanity, but only as a bridge to something higher than humanity (the *Übermensch*). To assert humanism as such was a cataclysm for Nietzsche, perhaps identical to the coming of the Last Man, who claims "we have invented happiness" - and blinks. In his view, the humanists moronically assert the same slave morality that religion had taught them, but without a Prime Mover to impose these values, whereby they become empty and meaningless.

And we can add one more name to this list of critics of Sartrean humanism: Sartre himself. Notice that the argument against the self-identity of the subject is practically the same as Sartre's own "proof" against the existence of God: that it is impossible for the in-itself to coincide perfectly with the for-itself. There is always a remainder that prevents the identity of the in-and-for-itself, and it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this is true not only on the Divine level, but on the individual human level as well. Indeed, and this is not recognized often enough, Sartre's life was one of relentless self-criticism, and in his mature period he himself abandoned his youthful belief in an individual autonomous subject that was perfectly free and for whom any divergence from this doctrine of pure freedom was nothing but bad faith.

Reading Lacan along these lines, it is easy to assimilate him to this tradition, and to say that Lacan was a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, deconstructing the human subject, facilitating its auto-deconstruction, treating a person as a text and teasing out the internal inconsistency of this text, its inability to match up with itself, which is what we call the unconscious. It is clear that even Jacques-Alain Miller, who edited the Seminar, had something like this in mind, for he goes so far as to title the thirteenth lecture "The Deconstruction of the Drive." (Lacan 1974:161)

Indeed, what of Jacques Derrida himself, widely regarded as an important founder of deconstruction? Derrida met Lacan at the famous colloquium on structuralism at Johns Hopkins University where he presented "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences," two years after Seminar XI. The following year he released three of his most famous books (Speech and Phenomena, Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference) and here at this epochal moment in deconstruction he in some ways repeats Lacan's basic move, particularly in Writing and Difference when he demonstrates the enormous extent to which his concept of "trace" comes from thinking through psychoanalysis.

But as I've indicated already, this (deconstructionist) way of understanding Lacan that I've been sketching is not the best interpretation, because Lacan and Derrida, though superficially similar, are in fact deeply distinct and even opposed. First of all, the deconstructionist reading of Lacan fails on its own terms. What is Derrida's whole trajectory? Derrida points out that every philosopher wants to have the last word - to be the final philosopher, rather than another link in the chain (for Derrida, this desire is a structurally necessary element of philosophy). In his indictment of the entire history of Western philosophy, he wants to find openings in this closure, so that discursivity engenders itself through indefinite displacements and deferrals. But to read Lacan as a deconstructionist is remarkably infertile. If that's all there is to Lacan, then that's the end of the story. So doesn't this call upon us, so to speak, to deconstruct the deconstruction? To see the

*aporeia* in this interpretation, the places where the text seems to offer the very opposite of its overt content?

If you didn't know the history of punk rock, and just heard their music along with other punk rockers, you might think that the Ramones were satirizing the other, more earnest, serious, political punks like Crass and the Clash. Instead of attempting to rally the working class to revolt and free themselves from oppression, instead of saying "I want to riot," like the Clash sang in "White Riot," the Ramones sang "I Wanna Be Sedated," and "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue." But the crazy irony is that the Ramones came *first, before* the people they were satirizing. History is filled with these kinds of mind-bending, time-traveling trajectories, where the satirist comes before the thing that she satirizes. What if Lacan could be read this way - not as attacking Sartre, but as attacking those post-structuralist critics who attack Sartre and existential humanism - even though these writers had not yet appeared?

Looking at Lacan this way, far from deconstructing the Cartesian subject, Lacan is already reviving it from its future detractors. Like Heidegger, Lacan sees Freud as operating within the Cartesian tradition - only for Lacan, this is no reproach. ("I dare to state as a truth that the Freudian field was possible only a certain time after the emergence of the Cartesian subject, in so far as modern science began only after Descartes made his inaugural step." (Lacan 1973: 47)) This may sound strange, coming from the same writer who wrote, in the *Ecrits*, 14 years earlier, that "The conception of the mirror stage... sheds [light] on the formation of the I as we experience it in psychoanalysis. It is an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*." (Lacan 1949:1) But the Cartesian subject will be utterly destroyed through his analysis - it will be utterly transformed.

In the third lecture of Seminar XI, Lacan distinguishes between certainty and truth with reference to Freud's *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (Freud 1901: 1–122) and *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* (Freud 1920). Referring to this brief essay, Lacan points out how Freud "pokes fun at those who, on the subject of his patient's dreams can say to him: *But where is this unconscious that is supposed to bring us to the truth, to a divine truth?* they ask sarcastically. *Your patient is just laughing at you, since, in analysis, she has dreams on purpose to convince you that she she was returning to what was asked of her, a liking for men.* Freud sees no objection in this. *The unconscious*, he tells us, *is not the dream.* What he means is that the unconscious may operate in the direction of deception, and that this does not in any way count as an objection for him. Indeed, how could there not be truth about lying - that truth which makes it perfectly possible, contrary to the supposed paradox, to declare, *I am lying?*" (Lacan 1973: 37-38; italics in original) Lacan goes on: "What the female homosexual does... in

deceiving Freud, is still an act of defiance in relation to the father: *You want me to love men, you will have as many dreams about love of men as you wish.* It is defiance in the form of derision." Immediately after this comment, Lacan claims "I have developed this introduction in such detail so that you may distinguish the exact position of the Freudian approach to the subject - in so far as it is the subject that is concerned in the field of the unconscious. In this way, I have distinguished the function of the subject of certainty from the search for the truth." (Lacan 1973: 39)

This is how Lacan presents a structuralist - almost, in a certain manner of speaking, a "behaviorist" - interpretation of psychoanalysis. The unconscious is not something deep "within" the patient, but rather a structuring gap right on the surface of her actions, even and especially when she is intending to deceive (indeed, even when her unconscious deceives!). This place of the subject is the pivot - Lacan calls it, in the very next lecture, "Archimedic" (Lacan 1973: 43) - the point of certainty upon which he will build his entire enterprise. We cannot be wrong about the subject, because certainty is radically separate from truth; even when we set out to deceive, the unconscious works through our very deception. "I would... like to stress that the correlative of the subject is henceforth no longer the deceiving Other, but the deceived Other." (Lacan 1973: 37) As with Descartes' Meditations, it is not that there is empirical evidence that the subject exists, but rather that *we cannot be wrong* about the subject. For Descartes, the attempt to posit "I am not" collapses, because if I am not, then who thinks this? With Lacan, this mode of reasoning is transformed: rather than the *cogito*, it is the *libido* of which we can be certain - the encounter with the real of our desire, which operates even through our attempts to deceive (ourselves). Somewhat startlingly and paradoxically, it is precisely this, the real of our desire, that will not allow us to accept that "life is a dream". (Lacan 1973: 53) What makes us real is what we lack.

Žižek explains this key issue, the relation of the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated, by way of reference to *Blade Runner* (Žižek 1993: 41). We may tell ourselves, "I think, therefore I am," and thereby comfort ourselves and give ourselves confidence in our own existence. But in so doing, we forget that we could just as easily program a computer to say "I think, therefore I am," or invent a fictional character in a book or a movie that says "I think therefore I am." We are here forgetting the distinction between the subject of the enunciated - the grammatical placeholder, the pronoun "I," which is a part of speech that can be fully replicated and said by anyone, including replicants, and the subject of the enunciation, the flesh and blood self that is saying the words "I think therefore I am." In a sense, these two subjects are at war - or perhaps it is simply a slaughter, with the linguistic representation "I" utterly destroying the one who speaks it. As Lacan reformulated Descartes famous apothegm, "I think where I am not, therefore I

am where I think not.” The two are irreconcilable - but it is this very impossibility of reconciliation that renders us real and is the pivot of our certainty. As Žižek writes:

In short, the implicit thesis of *Blade Runner* is that replicants are pure subjects precisely insofar as they testify that every positive, substantial content, inclusive of the most intimate fantasies, is not 'their own' but already implanted. In this precise sense, subject is by definition nostalgic, a subject of loss. Let us recall how, in *Blade Runner*, Rachel silently starts to cry when Deckard proves to her that she is a replicant. The silent grief over the loss of her 'humanity', the infinite longing to be or to become human again, although she knows this will never happen; or, conversely, the eternal gnawing doubt over whether I am truly human or just an android - it is these very undecided, intermediate states which make me human.

Lacan's description here turns out quite surprisingly in a certain sense to match rather closely with the all-too-quickly abandoned Sartre. To be a bit facetious, it may be summarized: "Subject, yes! Ego, no!" Sartre pushed, for most of his life, for a return to the Cartesian subject. But this is not the same as the ego, and particularly the transcendent ego in Husserl's sense, which he criticized quite early (Sartre 1934). Likewise, Lacan saw in Freud the same kind of certainty that can be found in the writings of Descartes. ("The major term is not truth. It is *Gewissheit*, certainty. Freud's method is Cartesian - in the sense that he sets out from the basis of the subject of certainty." (Lacan 1974: 35)) Like Sartre, Lacan was reviving Descartes against his Heideggerian detractors (and mightn't this, by extension, also be said of Žižek? Žižek is relatively silent on the topic of Sartre - a sure sign that Sartre is an overwhelming influence on him, since he is loudly voluminous on every other topic).

If Lacan's work can be considered a science, it is precisely a Cartesian science (Lacan calls it a "conjectural science of the subject" (Lacan 1973: 43) and *not* empirical science, which Lacan sees as being derived from, and inferior to, its Cartesian original. Lacan's work, in his own words, proceeds "from the Cartesian experience experience reducing to a single point the ground of inaugural certainty [which] made possible the quite different direction that science has taken, namely, that initiated by Newton." (Lacan 1973: 43) Here we see a sharp distinction between Lacan and Derrida. For Derrida, "In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand" (Derrida 1981: 41) and Derrida's project, again and again, is to contest this hierarchy. But Lacan here is clearly and unabashedly giving priority to one form of certainty - that of the Cartesian subject - over and above another form of certainty - that of empirical science. Empirical science achieves its certainty in the domain of knowledge, i.e. in the register of the Symbolic, and in knowledge's basis in vision,

audition, gustation, olfaction, and so on, i.e. in the Imaginary. On the contrary, Lacan's Cartesian science only finds its certainty in the holes in knowledge, the places where knowledge "limps," that is, in the encounter of the Real. That having been said, it would be awkward to accuse Lacan here of engaging in the metaphysics of presence, since what gives psychoanalysis, as science of the subject, its privilege over the empirical sciences is precisely absence. Even more than Descartes' original *Meditations*, in which the subject is the nothingness that is left after subjectivity has been evacuated of all of its determinate content (through radical doubt), psychoanalysis is cleared of all charges of idealism, according to Lacan, because its subject is (here Lacan quotes from Democritus, and his attempt at defining the *clinamen* through recourse to the neologism "*den*", derived from *meden* ("nothing") by removing the beginning of this word, which Lacan translates as) "*Nothing, perhaps? - not perhaps nothing, but not nothing.*" (Lacan 1973: 64) Barbara Cassin has remarked "I would love to make him say: *Pas rien, mais moins que rien* (Not nothing, but less than nothing)" (Badiou and Cassin 2010: 82) from which Žižek derived the title of his most recent book.

One senses that Lacan here is speaking, directly, for the unconscious. The unconscious cannot be wrong, in psychoanalysis. More than this, through Lacan, the unconscious speaks - the unconscious is composed of nothing but speech. Even if there is a contradiction, what the unconscious tells us is the truth. Lacan's seminar was a series of performances, not unlike that of certain musicians, in which the performer unwraps the gift of the evanescent, allows the dance to move him rather than attempting to move or change it. The unconscious is speech. Through this dream-like logic, which, like the Pope, is infallible, the unconscious is not a speech, the specific action of an individual and a specific time and place, or what Saussure would have called "*parole*" (remembering that, for Kant, time and space were precisely what were ideal). Rather, the unconscious is speech itself, *langue*, a synchronic system like a language, with its own grammar-like rules.

Lacan's "science" can be seen not only as an attempt to apply the insights of structural linguistics to the field of psychoanalysis, but more importantly, as a development within structural linguistics itself, a profound carrying out of the logic of structuralism, pushing it to its inevitable conclusions. To reiterate, the question structuralists worked on was: of what can we be certain within language itself? The structuralists knew to forget about nature, for nature was the realm of their more limited brethren, the "scientists" or, as they were known before prevailing trends, the "natural philosophers." The structuralists claimed to be something... if not "higher," then... a bit more complex. The natural scientist deals with the object in its inert, raw self. The linguistic scientist, on the other hand, is restricted from nature and unproved naturalist assumptions, and therefore cannot claim to see, or know, or operate the natural object in itself in any way (and

wonders how the natural scientist can make this claim). The linguist, therefore, is forced to fight his battle, unaided, within language. He asks: of what can we be certain, within language?

And to this question, Lacan provided an answer: the unconscious. Other, naturalist forms of knowledge fall outside of language. Nonetheless, this unconscious existed only as a gap in language, paradoxically inside and outside of it, like a supplement, forming the border or limit of language, just as, for Kant, metaphysics properly consisted only of its limit. The unconscious is certain precisely because it is not there, less than nothing, in language but not of language, in language but outside of every word, every speech-act, *between* language.

It is at this point that we may begin to compare the Heideggerian *weltanschauung* with that of Lacan. Heidegger can be seen, in *Being and Time*, as undertaking a deconstruction of Husserl's Cartesianism. From this fundamental gesture can be derived the entire history of deconstruction, through Derrida, to De Man, Butler, Critchley, and beyond. But how are we to take this Heideggerian deconstruction? It would seem that Husserl saw Frege and the logical positivists as forgetting something fundamental, namely that which Descartes highlighted, and which he (mis)named the *cogito* - our very experience of being, which is the foundation of all other knowledge. (Later, writers in Wittgenstein's tradition would wonder whether we can even speak of such an experience, or whether this is a nonsensical example of "private language.") But Heidegger took a step back from this debate, changing its terms: for Heidegger, something had indeed been forgotten by Frege and the logical positivists, and that which had been forgotten was being itself. But far from trying to revive Cartesianism, as Husserl had, Heidegger saw the Cartesian metaphysics of "subject" and "object" as part of the problem, part of the way in which we were forgetting being, and merely one step in a long progression of the history of the forgetting of being that began near the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece - a history that would have to be overcome. And yet, this still begs a question, for deconstruction is not the same as simple destruction. Would Descartes and the Cartesian subject, under deconstruction, be simply obliterated? Or should it be purified of its confusion and idle chatter, so that the being concealed within it could be disclosed? Or is there yet a third option?

One way to interpret Lacan here is to see in his work just such a radically different third option. In focusing, even more strongly than Heidegger, on language as the locus of philosophical activity, and in eschewing nature, Lacan takes the radical step of *deliberately and intentionally forgetting being*. For Husserl and his theory of the intentionality of consciousness, the act of forgetting presented a problem, since it is impossible to forget something intentionally. The structuralists, at least those in the tradition of Lacan, therefore, in their patient movement toward an encounter with the real, are doing the impossible: intentionally forgetting being.



This raises the possibility of a bold reversal of Heidegger. For Heidegger, words as they are used in modern language are worn-out instruments, yet still full of the meaning they once had when first used in poetry. But what if the opposite of this is the case? What if words only become meaningful once we forget being? This is the possibility raised by structuralism and structural psychoanalysis - that only when language is unfettered from being can the event occur.

This brings us full circle to the question of whether, for Lacan, psychoanalysis is a science. The answer, or rather the deferral of an answer, is of course to say that it depends upon what we mean by science. I see at least three possible translations for the French word, *science*: the English word, "science," the German word "*Wissenschaft*," and the Italian word, "*scienza*." Of these three, the English word has the shortest history. If, by science, we mean the Anglo-American empiricist tradition (now, of course, practiced universally) that proceeds according to the scientific method - identifying a quantifiable problem, checking the literature for previous theories and hypotheses, forming an original, testable hypothesis, designing a controlled experiment, double-blinding it, performing the experiment multiple times, carefully amassing and assessing the data, checking for hidden variables, performing Bayesian statistics, publishing one's results and waiting for confirmation through peer-review, then of course psychoanalysis is not "science" in this sense.

We come closer to the meaning of Lacan's science when we consider the German word "*Wissenschaft*," with a more complex history and a few more layers of ambiguity than the English word. *Ein Wissenschaft* is something rigorous, determinate, and concrete, though not necessarily materialistic; indeed, the pride of *Bildung* (education or cultivation) during the time of German idealism was to produce *Geisteswissenschaft*, nowadays awkwardly translated as "the humanities," but something more closely approximating the "science of the spirit" or "science of the mind," or "science of the soul," remembering that *Geist* is something that Germans tend(ed) to associate with art, as in that idea so important to German Romantics, the aesthete, or "beautiful soul" ("*Schöngeist*"). Schelling, Hegel, Brentano, and Husserl can all be considered *Wissenschaftler* ("scientists") in this sense, and to this list we can add the name of Freud.

But I believe that we come closest to Lacan's "conjectural science of the subject" in the much older Italian concept of "*scienza*," as in "*la gaia scienza*" used so often by the lyrical poets (by which I mean poets that played the lyre) of the Italian Renaissance to describe their craft. It seems appropriate to compare psychoanalysis with something this old, as Lacan himself compares it with alchemy (Nietzsche referenced this Italian phrase, and its obsolete Provençal equivalent, "*Gai Saber*" for the title of his book, The Gay Science). This gay science is a dancing wisdom, a light wisdom rather than a heavy one, a wisdom that has learned to move *presto* and thus traverse the fantasy. In its original meaning, from the 14th, and 15th centuries, *la gaia scienza* was a kind of

game, a contest of the *consistori di Tolosa*, begun by 7 members who, in their manifesto, pledged to award prizes to those who wrote verses in a manner fitting the golden age of the troubadours from the 12th and 13th centuries, as closely as possible. Their motivation was clear: after the Albigensian crusade, the troubadours were in danger of being wiped out by the Church, targeted as they were as alleged purveyors of the Cathar heresy. Winning the game was a matter of great honor, and legend has it that duels were occasionally fought over the results. Thomas Carlyle may have been influenced by the term when he dubbed economics “the dismal science”. Nietzsche says that these knight-poet-free spirits invented passionate love and calls them “magnificent and inventive human beings of the *gai saber*” to whom Europe owes so many things and almost owes itself.” *La gaia scienza* was thus a serious game with the highest stakes, a matter of life and death, a performative work of creativity and originality that also required precise technique and a fealty to ancient forms, a work of passionate love that is the very contrary of economics, of putting oneself in the service of goods. In this sense of performing before a judge, the castrating and meaning-giving Other, this science finds its law, which I find most compatible with Lacan’s own definition of our science, which, he claims, is distinguished from “science in its infancy” such as the truth-belief-justification theory of knowledge displayed in the *Theatetus*, by the fact that “here and now,” “when a science arises, a master is always present.” (Lacan 1974, 47) (But Lacan hints that this needn’t always be so, with a cryptic reference to the idea that “this pedicle might, one day, be reduced.”) Evidently this foreshadows Lacan’s theory, developed later, in Seminar XVII, of science as “the discourse of the master.”

It has already become an old joke to refer to Slavoj Žižek and some of his compatriots (Fredric Jameson, Alain Badiou, Terry Eagleton...) as “post-postmodernists,” or “post-poststructuralists” given their hard-left opposition to the complacencies and subtle orthodoxies of contemporary liberal academic culture, and, at the same time, their insistence on working *through* post-structuralist theory rather than attempting to ignore it or circumvent it - “traversing the fantasy,” as it were. But perhaps it would be better to call Žižek a “pre-post-structuralist” - that is, a writer whose work can no longer simply be assimilated to the structuralist corpus, but who is, at the same time, *not yet* a post-structuralist. Pre-post-structuralists would be those for whom the structuralist tradition still has something to teach us. And this goes for modernism as well: this group of thinkers can be called “pre-post-modernists” in the sense that they would insist that *history is not bunk*. We sit at the feet of history, all of history, including that paradoxical, troubling, painful period of history known as the modern period, complete with all its terrors, from psychoanalysis, to abstract expressionism, to the Stalinist purges. Nietzsche once claimed that German philosophy was derived from awful German cuisine and as such was a *constipated* philosophy: “The German

spirit is an indigestion - it does not finish with anything." So it is with us, and very well! We continue to tarry with the negative of the modern world, patiently awaiting its lessons.

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