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Formal Truth and the Unconscious

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This chapter has its place within a broader investigation of the forms available to the life of a speaking being, in abeyance of any assured commensurability between being and the thinking of which she is capable. Here I shall be interested specifically in a linguistic subject's relationship to truth: in how a formalism that evinces the structure of truth as it is available to a finite subject of language effectively constrains and situates the occasions and circumstances of such a subject's life. In the terms Jacques Lacan announces at the beginning of the programmatic 1966 essay "Science and Truth," this unavailability of any direct support for a presumed being-thinking relationship is what most directly allows for the formulation of what he indicates tentatively as "the status of the *subject* in psychoanalysis" (Lacan 1966, p. 726). This status involves, constitutively, a central splitting (*Spaltung*) of the subject's structure, effectively verified on a "more or less daily" basis by the analyst in clinical praxis and taken

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as “given” there, between *knowledge* and *truth* (Lacan 1966, pp. 726–727). This abeyance of the being-thinking relationship here has the significance that what effectively can figure as the subject’s knowledge stands in constitutive and incommensurable division with any truth supposed to sustain her in her being. The discovery of this essential and constitutive division is, as Lacan immediately clarifies, nothing other than Freud’s radical discovery of the unconscious itself.

This discovery, which follows the structure of Freud’s “second topography” (*Ich*, *Über-ich*, and *Es*), introduces a decisive “reworking of analytic experience” that constitutes a structure, dialectic, and—in connection with the linguistic structuralism with which Lacan equips it—a logic (Lacan 1966, p. 727). This logic comprehends what can be truly said of the subject’s structure, given the split between knowledge and truth that henceforth defines it. But in that it captures the truth of this structure, this logic is—as I shall argue here—just the structure which can be formalized, on independent logical and semantic grounds, as the linguistic structure of truth itself. Here I shall explore this logic, drawing equally on a formalism of truth that has had a determining influence in analytic philosophy’s investigation of language and meaning: the Polish logician Alfred Tarski’s formulation of the necessary schematism of any adequate theorization of linguistic truth. I shall argue that the consequences of this schematism both verify and extend the implications of Lacan’s conception of the constitutive *Spaltung* of the linguistic subject. This schema thereby suffices to indicate the severely constrained forms in which a subject’s being and identity are sustained in her discourse.

If the question of the subject’s support in discourse is also the question of what, in the structure of truth, linguistically conditions a subject’s life, this investigation must include as well the question of the subject’s relationship to what functions as the *cause* of her being. I argue that if the analytic formulation of truth shows that any possible *subjective* articulation of truth must also be *structurally* articulated, this structural articulation serves to clarify the placement of such a subject relative to the field of language by and in which it sustains itself. While Tarski’s formalism, as we shall see, demonstrates that there is no subjective or substantial origin of truth, it thus nevertheless also indicates the place of the enunciation of truth in relation to the world as it figures in our knowledge: this place, in

Lacanian terms, is the place of the unconscious. In the analysis, what occupies the position of the unconscious is shown to be a transcendental but illusory “I” from which—as Lacan puts it in “The Freudian Thing” of 1955, with a formulation that he later once again evokes at a precise moment in “Science and Truth”—“I, truth, speak.” In the last part of the paper, I accordingly consider how the structural *consistency* of a linguistic subject’s existence is grounded in the “one” of an imagined unitary cause as well as how that unity is both conditioned and problematized by the formalism that precedes and unravels it.

Part One

I shall begin with three general claims about language and truth that have, for the Lacan of the later 1960s, something like the status of axioms. All three are presupposed in the argument of “Science and Truth,” and all three capture aspects of what Lacan takes to be the implications of Freud’s radical discovery of the existence and linguistic structure of the unconscious. My interest here is not in establishing or defending these theses but rather in exploring their consequences for the effective structure of truth and the possible operation of this structure as cause:

1. (The truth of) the unconscious has the (logical-syntactic) structure of a language. The claim that the “unconscious is structured like a language” is both a minimal commitment of Lacan’s structuralism from an early stage in his career and an ongoing fixture of his analysis of the subject’s discourse, capturing the linguistic core of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious itself.¹ Given this claim, it follows that any truth that

¹Since at least the “Rome Discourse” (“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”) of 1953: “The true basis of the Freudian discovery of the unconscious becomes clear in its position as a third term. This may be simply formulated in the following terms:

The unconscious is that part of concrete discourse qua transindividual, which is not at the subject’s disposal in reestablishing the continuity of his conscious discourse.

This disposes of the paradox presented by the concept of the unconscious when it is related to an individual reality. For to reduce this concept to unconscious tendencies is to resolve the paradox only by avoiding analytic experience, which clearly shows that the unconscious is of the same nature as ideational functions, and even of thought. Freud plainly stressed this when, unable to

is relevant to the subject of the unconscious is itself structured linguistically. This linguistic character of the subject's truth also situates Lacan's most consistent "definition" of the subject in the 1960s: that the subject is that which subsists in the signifying chain as what is signified by one signifier to another. Moreover, as he emphasizes in "Science and Truth," the linguistic character of a subject's truth is the basis of the entire claim of psychoanalysis to a *materialism* earned by its potential contribution to scientific knowledge of the systematic study of the signifier and its discursive effects.²

2. The logic of truth is a *propositional* logic. That is, it is a logic that primarily governs relations, not between words and terms, but between *assertoric sentences*: sentences expressing claims that are evaluable as either true or false. If the first axiom already expresses a programmatic commitment to a logical-structural articulation of how the unconscious articulates knowledge with respect to truth, it is clear that this articulation requires a logic that is propositional in this sense. Such a logic will, in addition to considering sentences as having truth-values (true or false), provide rules governing deductive relationships between them: relationships that allow us to pass, by rational inference, from truths to truths, but never from truths to falsehoods. These rules will be formal in the sense that their application does not depend on the

avoid a conjunction of opposing terms in the expression 'unconscious thought,' he gave it the necessary support with the invocation: *sit venia verbo*. Thus we obey him by casting the blame, in effect, onto the Word, but onto the Word realized in discourse that darts from mouth to mouth, conferring on the act of the subject who receives its message the meaning that makes this act an act of his history and gives it its truth." (Lacan 1953, pp. 258–259)

² "But that will be so as to clarify that psychoanalysis instead emphasizes its guise as material cause, a fact that qualifies psychoanalysis' originality in science.

This material cause is truly the form of impact of the signifier that I define therein.

The signifier is defined by psychoanalysis as acting first of all as if it were separate from its signification... In short, we once again come upon the subject of the signifier as I articulated it last year. Conveyed by a signifier in relation to another signifier, the subject must be as rigorously distinguished from the biological individual as from any psychological evolution subsumable under the subject of understanding.

In minimal terms, this is the function I grant language in theory. It seems to me compatible with historical materialism, the latter having left this point unaddressed. Perhaps the theory of the object *a* will also find its place therein.

As we shall see, this theory is necessary to a correct integration of the function—from the standpoint of knowledge and the subject—of truth as cause." (Lacan 1966, pp. 743–744)

specific subject matter or associations of the sentences in question but only on their truth-values and constituent logical structure. Lacan articulates this point, on behalf of the analyst's discourse, in *Seminar XVII*:

In truth, something worth being supported right from the start is that 'truth' is not a word to be handled outside propositional logic, where it is made into a value, reduced to the inscription, to the handling of a symbol, usually a capital T, its initial. This usage, as we shall see, is most particularly bereft of hope. This is what is salubrious about it. (Lacan 1970, p. 62)³

3. There is no metalanguage. The claim that there is no coherent position from which it is possible to master or survey signification, as a whole, is articulated by Lacan as early as in his 1960 essay, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," where he maintains that "there is no Other of the Other" (Lacan 1960, p. 688). In this claim, Lacan implies, as we shall see, that there is no coherent position from which it is possible to speak the *whole* truth about truth: in other words, no *consistent* position from which a subject of language can explicate the truth of her discourse as a whole. In "Science and Truth," Lacan identifies this "lack of truth about truth" as introducing into the subject's life the dimension of primal repression [*Urverdrängung*] and thereby the location of the specific effects of a subject's presumed relation to truth:

This lack of truth about truth—necessitating as it does all the traps that metalanguage, as sham and logic, falls into—is the rightful place of *Urverdrängung*, that is, of primal repression which draws toward itself all the other repressions—not to mention other rhetorical effects that we can recognize only by means of the subject of science. (Lacan 1966, pp. 736–737)

³ Compare also to "The Subversion of the Subject" (Lacan 1960, p. 672): "If we conduct the subject anywhere, it is to a deciphering which assumes that a sort of logic is already operative in the unconscious, a logic in which, for example, an interrogative voice or even the development of an argument can be recognized."

With these three commitments in mind, I would like now to consider what kind of formalism can be seen to embody them jointly on the level of an overall formal-structural account of linguistic truth. I suggest that they are sufficiently and also uniquely captured by the formalism that Alfred Tarski first suggests in connection with formal rather than natural languages in the 1931 article “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages” (Tarski 1931). Tarski argues that an adequate and correct definition of truth for a particular language will yield, as deductive consequences of the definition, the totality of “T-sentences” for arbitrary sentences of the language in the following form:

(Convention T): “ p ” is true if, and only if, p .

Convention T is not meant or intended to be, itself, a definition of truth. But Tarski’s reasonable suggestion is that *any* adequate definition of truth for a particular language will yield every instance of Convention T, for variable sentences p in the language, as deductive consequences of the definition. In the schema, what appears on the right-hand side is an arbitrary sentence p , and on the left-hand side, a name for that sentence. Typically (but not necessarily) the names of sentences can be formed by means of the linguistic device of quotation so that, for example, “Snow is white” functions as an unstructured name for the sentence within the single quotation marks (Tarski 1931, pp. 187–188).⁴

Tarski’s main concern in the article is with formally defined languages; but familiarly, there are two notable features of the “Convention T”-schema that have recommended it to theorists of truth and meaning in natural languages as well. The first is that it plausibly captures what has been called the “redundancy” or “transparency” feature of truth with respect to assertion: that (in some sense) to assert “It is true that p ” is to make the same assertion as if one were simply to assert “ p .” This equivalence, whatever else we may wish to say about its origin or basis, is plausibly captured by the T-schema by way of its central biconditional, the “if

⁴More rigorously, as Tarski says, what can be substituted on the left side is any “structural-descriptive” name for the sentence that appears on the right.

and only if” that links the truth-assertion to the simple assertion itself.⁵ Second, and relatedly, a theory of truth that systematically produces all of the T-sentences for a language thereby captures the overall dependence of the language’s sentence meanings on their truth-conditions: that is, on the worldly conditions which must hold in order to make them true.

As the influential analytic philosopher of language Donald Davidson and others have underscored, given that the meaning of a sentence may be given by a specification of its truth-conditions, a theory of truth for a natural language systematically yielding the T-sentences can be understood as embodying a theory of meaning for that language.⁶ Since there are many alternative ways of construing the actual relationship between a sentence and the proposition, fact, or state of affairs that makes it true, it is not clear what it would mean to say that one of these relationships is the “right” one, and I do not wish to go into this here. For the present analysis, what is important is just the way the T-schema—or a suitable theory of truth in accordance with it—can manifest what is involved in a subject or speaker’s understanding of her language, exactly by manifesting the way in which that understanding is linked to the language’s conditions of truth.

What consequences does this have for a subject’s knowledge? If the T-schema indeed captures the kind of articulation that a subject’s linguistic truth can have, it is notable that this articulation is irreducibly

⁵ As Michael Beaney writes in a footnote (*The Frege Reader*, p. 328), this feature was perhaps first recognized, in the analytic tradition, by Frege in his notes “Introduction to Logic” from around 1906: “In fact at bottom the sentence ‘It is true that 2 is prime’ says no more than the sentence ‘2 is prime’” (Frege 1906, p. 297); see also Frege’s “The Thought” (Frege 1918). Lacan also appears to endorse it in *Seminar XVII* in the course of his discussion of Wittgenstein: “It is in effect clear that it is defensible to say, and this is Wittgenstein’s position, that no sign of affirmation needs to be added to what is assertion pure and simple. An assertion declares itself to be the truth ... The true depends only—this is where I have to reintroduce the dimension I am arbitrarily separating from it—on my utterance, namely on whether I state it appropriately. The true is not internal to the proposition, where only the fact, the factitious nature, of language is declared.

It is true that it is a fact, a fact constituted by my saying it, on those occasions when it’s true. But that it is true is not a fact, unless I explicitly add that, moreover, it’s true. It is just that, as Wittgenstein puts it very well, it’s quite superfluous for me to add it.” (Lacan 1970, pp. 67–68)

It should also be noted that endorsing the redundancy *feature*—as Frege and Lacan do—does not necessarily imply holding what has been called a “redundancy theory” or “deflationary theory” of truth overall.

⁶ See, for example, Davidson (1967, 1970).

conditional in two ways. First, the articulation of its knowledge overall must—as it must preserve the true—be an *inferential* articulation, one which preserves at least the rule *modus ponens* (if it is the case that *A*, and also, *if A then B*, then *B* follows as a consequence) and never allows the derivation of a falsehood from a truth. This has decisive consequences for the form of the logical conditional (the “if-then”) within the subject’s knowledge, but we will come back to these in the next section. Second, the T-sentences are *themselves* conditional sentences, centrally structured as “if-then” (and in fact biconditional: “if and only if”) relationships. Thus, the schema overall represents the relationship between sentences and their truth-conditions as requiring equivalent truth-values on both sides (i.e., either true and true or false and false, but never a true on one side and a false on the other). This means that—and we will also return to this later—from the standpoint of propositional logic’s articulation of linguistic truth, any position from which the speaking subject may be said to constitute itself in the articulation of its knowledge must be subject, as an ideal requirement, to this symmetry of truth-values between language and world.

However, the most decisive structural consequence of the application of the Tarski sentences for any possible articulation of the position of the subject as such is the *paradoxical* one that Tarski already notes, with respect to the overall *consistency* of a language that includes its own truth-predicate (thus, a language that is capable of expressing its own sentence’s claims to, and conditions of, truth).⁷ The conclusion is that any language that thus includes its own semantic discourse, as well as the ability arbitrarily to refer to (i.e., to form names of) its own sentences, will necessarily be *inconsistent* (Tarski 1931, p. 165). For, given this arbitrary self-reference, it is possible to produce a “Liar” sentence of the form:

p: ‘*p*’ is not true

In conjunction with the T-schema, this will then produce a T-sentence of the form

⁷The language in question must also be capable of expressing arithmetic.

p' is true if and only if '*p*' is not true

and thus an inconsistency.

Tarski familiarly concludes from this that it is *not* possible for a natural language adequately to characterize its own truth-structure: the systematic theorization of truth-in-a-language, L, must be conducted in another, distinct language L' that is in some sense "stronger" than L itself. This suffices to block the possibility of forming the self-referential Liar-like sentence and thus preserves the consistency of the "object language" itself. But this is, of course, nothing other than the requirement of a *metalinguage* with which to discuss a language's truth-structure.⁸

As a general theoretical constraint, this requirement of a metalanguage has some plausibility when, as for Tarski, what is in question is explicitly the theorization of artificial or "formal" languages, and it is plausible that another formal language, or perhaps a "natural" one such as English, can indeed operate as such a metalanguage for its study.⁹ But whereas, for Lacan, the totality of a subject's discourse is at issue, there is clearly no warrant for it—for we have no way to understand what such a position might amount to—and here Lacan's axiomatic denial of the possibility that a metalanguage position could express clearly the radical unavailability, to the psychoanalytic discourse, of any position outside the subject's own language in which it could be meaningful to articulate her truth. But without such a metalanguage, as Tarski shows, there can be no overall consistent articulation of the truth-predicate of a subject's language. Put in Lacan's terms, this amounts to the recognition *that there is*

⁸ "In contrast to natural languages, the formalized languages do not have the universality which was discussed at the end of the preceding section. In particular, most of these languages possess no terms belonging to the theory of language, i.e. no expressions which denote signs and expressions of the same or another language or which describe the structural connexions between them (such expressions I call—for lack of a better term—*structural-descriptive*). For this reason, when we investigate the language of a formalized deductive science, we must always distinguish clearly between the language *about* which we speak and the language *in* which we speak, as well as between the science which is the object of investigation and the science in which the investigation is carried out. The names of the expressions of the first language, and of the relations between them, belong to the second language, called the *metalinguage* (which may contain the first as a part)." (Tarski 1931, p. 167)

⁹ In Tarski's usage, a "formal" language is one, such as the formal symbolic calculi of propositional logic or set theory, that is universally determined by stipulated rules of symbolism, whereas "natural" languages are actually spoken languages such as English or French.

no consistent truth about truth: no way to capture consistently, that is, the structure of what counts as truth in any subject's discourse as a whole. So, it will follow, given this axiomatic denial and the denial of any possibility of transcendental positioning that it formulates, that any systematic self-articulation, within a subject's discourse, of what amounts to her truth will be prone to a fundamental inconsistency, if it is construed as complete. It is then, as Lacan essentially notes, only the primal or original repression [*Urverdrängung*] of this inconsistency which can allow her to produce any possible image of this truth as a (consistent) whole.

In "Science and Truth," making reference to the close formal cousin of Tarski's antinomic result, namely, Gödel's incompleteness theorems, Lacan draws the clear logical consequence of this for the situation of the subject who can be defined as the correlate of knowledge, what he calls there in general the "subject of science":

I will indicate further along how modern logic is situated... It is indisputably the strictly determined consequence of an attempt to suture the subject of science, and Gödel's last theorem shows that the attempt fails there, meaning that the subject in question remains the correlate of science, but an antinomic correlate since science turns out to be defined by the deadlocked endeavor to suture the subject. (Lacan 1966, p. 731)

Although this is admittedly not completely clear, Lacan's reference to Gödel's "last" theorem here suggests that it is specifically the *second* incompleteness theorem that he has in mind. This is the theorem that establishes that, for any actually consistent¹⁰ language, it is impossible for such a language to prove, by means of its own internal resources, a statement asserting its own consistency. Thus, while Tarski's result establishes the impossibility, for any such language, of internally expressing adequately its own truth-predicate, Gödel's second theorem, drawing on the first theorem's internal development of a *provability* (rather than a truth) predicate, verifies the impossibility of such a predicate bearing witness to the consistency of the language in which it is formulable.

¹⁰ (and recursively enumerable)

In terms of Lacan's question of the total relationship of a subject's knowledge and truth, and the self-consistency of the subject, the two results together can be seen as establishing that—assuming the subject's knowledge to be *consistent* overall—there is necessarily (Tarski's result) some dimension of truth that knowledge cannot capture and, moreover, that (Gödel's result) one component of this unknowable truth is the very fact (if it is one) of the consistency of that knowledge itself. "Suture" here stands for—I will not go into exegetical detail—the attempt of a subject to locate itself consistently with respect to the totality of possible knowledge, the totality of what science is assumed able to know as true.¹¹ The attempt "to suture" is thus the attempt of the subject to ground itself in its position with respect to truth by reference to the—assumed or required—*total consistency* of its capacity to know.

In these terms and given that there is no metalanguage, it is clear that the conjunction of Tarski's and Gödel's results faces the subject, in its/her attempt to ensure the global consistency of what it/she can express as truth, with a decisive and insuperable dilemma. Either the attempt must be *incomplete*—it must stop short, in particular, of the truth of its consistency, the ultimate ground of any reliable truth it can be seen to have—or it must indeed be *inconsistent*, and hence, (on plausible assumptions) incapable of verifying its presumed soundness as knowledge at all.¹² As Lacan underscores, it follows that the subject of language is henceforth split and its attempt to suture its knowledge to the totality of truth consequently deadlocked. Either there is some truth of the subject's unity that it cannot know or the subject can essentially know itself only as essentially contradictory. Split between a knowledge that cannot verify its own completeness and the necessary inconsistency of any comprehensive

¹¹ In particular, I will not delve into the complex (and highly interesting) polemics among Serge Leclair, Jacques-Alain Miller, and Alain Badiou that arose from Lacan's use of the concept of "suture" in *Seminar XII* in connection with Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic* theory of number, which are played out in the subsequent opening issues of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*.

¹² I leave aside here the possibility of a logical development (e.g., in the context of a paraconsistent logic) on which an inconsistent system may nevertheless (arguably) be seen as (semantically) sound, for such a development would at least imply that its subject must be credited with knowledge of some untruths.

truth it could reflect, the subject is thus henceforth constitutively and radically excluded from the very point at which it would otherwise seek to ground the unity of its being in the self-consistency of its cause.

Part Two

In *Seminar XVII*, in the course of his discussion of the early Wittgenstein as the author who has “given the most forceful formulation to what results from the enterprise of proposing that the only truth there is, is inscribed in a proposition,” Lacan draws out some of what results from this enterprise of truth by noting a certain “paradox” thereby contained in the structure of propositional implication itself (Lacan 1970, p. 66, 69). As he notes, the structure of what is called by logicians’ “material” implication is such that, while a falsehood can imply a falsehood, a truth can imply a truth, and indeed a falsehood can imply a truth, the one possibility that must be ruled out is a truth that implies a falsehood. Familiarly, understood as a matter of the semantic and epistemic value of propositional inference itself, this last exclusion is just what is necessary, in order that inference be, in general, *truth-preserving*: in other words, that it exclude any possibility of leading us, in inference, from a truth to a falsehood. As Lacan effectively notes, it is also necessarily embodied in the logic of anything that can serve as a conditional (an *if-then* structure) within the language itself. For the logic of any such operator must be able minimally to allow for the preservation of truth in *modus ponens* and so must ensure (whatever it does with the other possible combinations of the antecedent and consequent of the conditional) the falsehood of the $T \rightarrow F$ combination.¹³

The paradoxical implication—a “scandal,” Lacan says—is that, as it is radically and essentially excluded that inference leads us from truth to

¹³ Lacan presents this as a consequence specifically of the logic of the *material* conditional. As is well known and for a variety of reasons, the material conditional does not plausibly capture the “real” logic of the “if...then” of entailment in natural language, and there are other, often non-truth-functional conditionals available that may well do a better job and treat some cases of the other truth-combinations ($F \rightarrow F$, $T \rightarrow T$, and $F \rightarrow T$) differently than the material conditional does. But as Priest (2006, pp. 83–84) notes, the specific features noted here—that truth is preserved going forward, that *modus ponens* is thus vindicated, and that $T \rightarrow F$ is *never* allowed—are at any rate very plausibly a feature of *any* entailment-expressing conditional that is worth the name.

falsity, the true itself has a genealogy whose tracing must always lead back to “an initial true”:

But that if... we reject that the true entail the false, that it can have a false consequent—for this is what we are rejecting, in the absence of which there would be no possible articulation of propositional logic—we end up with this curious fact that the true has a genealogy, that it always goes back to an initial true, from which it is no longer able to fall.

This is such a strange indication, one that is so challenged by our entire life, I mean our life as a subject, that this alone would be sufficient to question whether truth could in any way be isolated as an attribute—an attribute of anything capable of articulating with knowledge. (Lacan 1970, p. 69)

In other words, for any interpretation of the conditional capable of articulating the structure of truth within knowledge, it follows that any item of knowledge that the subject can thereby isolate can be traced back inferentially to some initial truth.¹⁴

Despite its evident necessity as grounded in the very structure of conditional implication itself, this is, as Lacan says, a strange indication. What could such “an initial true” be, such that any possible truth that can amount to knowledge for a subject must be seen as tracing back to it? The question, as posed in this context, is nothing other than the question of the initial constitution of a subject’s knowledge, the original establishment of what can appear, in its life, as truth. To ask this question with respect to what, in a subject’s life, could possibly support its answer is then—as I shall now argue—just to ask the question of the subject’s possible establishment in being: the causality of its establishment as the entity that it is. In “Science and Truth,” Lacan formulates this question as the one most central to the practice of psychoanalysis itself in its intervention on the basis of truth in the life of suffering subjects: namely, that

¹⁴This might appear not to be correct, particularly in the case of *reductio* arguments: for here the premise for *reductio* is (as Frege often emphasized) not asserted but only put forward “hypothetically”; so it may seem as if the truth of the conclusion of the argument does not require its premises to figure as “initial” truths in this sense. However, for any successful *reductio* arguments, there will still be other auxiliary premises which must figure as truths (including the truths expressing rules such as that of “negation introduction” itself).

of *truth as cause*.¹⁵ The problem of the initial true that is implied in the structure of inference is thus the one to which psychoanalysis must devote the whole of its attention in order to be what it is: that of the constitutive dimension of truth as active, which psychoanalysis essentially puts to work. But as the question of this activity is nothing other than the question of how a subject is established in its unitary being, the problem is nothing other than what Lacan recurrently specifies as that of the ground of the subject's being itself.

What implication does the articulation of propositional truth that we have discerned above have for this question of the origin of truth and hence for the original establishment of the subject? First, the proposition implies that there is no *substantive* or *subjective* origin of truth. Since the T-schema presents the truth of each sentence as consequent only on the particular state of affairs whose obtaining it expresses, there is, in the massively dispersed whole, *nothing* we can find as a unique or privileged position at which to locate a unitary basis for the truth. Given the plurality and dispersal of the structure exhibited by the infinity of T-sentences, there is nowhere *in the world* to situate the truth. Furthermore, as Lacan notes, the transcendent positioning that would locate it *outside* the world of any subject's discourse—for example, in the place of a worldless, and wordless, noumenon—similarly fails, given the essentially *linguistic* character of truth here discerned.¹⁶ Evidently, there is no possibility, consistent with this, of identifying the place of the initial true as that of any determinate *thing*.¹⁷

This also shows, for similar reasons, that a position from which truth can be grounded is not the position of any *one* either. In the dispersed plurality of T-sentences, there is no privileged unique position of “a” or “the” subject, and the first-person indexical or shifter “I” figures, within the field of truth, only as a non-distinguished and mobile point of

¹⁵ “Will you psychoanalysts refuse to take on the question of truth as cause when your very careers are built upon it? If there are any practitioners from whom truth as such is supposed to act, are you not them?” (Lacan 1966, p. 738).

¹⁶ “...for a truth that speaks has no-thing much [*peu de chose*] in common with a noumenon that, for as long as pure reason can remember, has always kept its mouth shut.” (Lacan 1966, p. 737)

¹⁷ Unless it be, as we shall see in a moment, that paradoxical (non-)thing which Lacan refers to in that way (“Le Chose Freudienne”)—with deliberate provocation and deliberate antinomy—in the title of “The Freudian Thing”: namely, the unconscious as discovered by Freud.

reference within some of them.¹⁸ As Lacan repeatedly and decisively underscores, this implies both an essential displacement and a decisive reinterpretation of the subjective moment of the *cogito sum*, in which Descartes inaugurates the modern constitution of science. That, in this displacement and rewriting, it should still be possible to recognize the way in which thought grounds itself in being, is what is nevertheless preserved in rewriting it in the way Lacan suggests, namely, as “I am thinking: ‘therefore I am’,” with quotes around the second clause (Lacan 1966, pp. 733–734).

This way of writing it, with the quotation of the second clause, expresses nothing other than the quotation marks which surround, in the T-schema, the homophonic proposition on the left-hand side. These quotations marks, in naming the sentence, transform it into a speakable or thinkable “content” with its associated truth-conditions and thereby confer our structural ability to consider the meaning arising from them. But equally, as Lacan also says, the rewriting suffices to show how thought grounds itself, and from there summons what it requires for the substance of its being there, in truth, *only* (we shall return to this in a moment) by “knotting itself in speech where every operation goes right to the essence of language” (Lacan 1966, pp. 733–734).¹⁹

The initial true, the being of the true as it can be known, is, then, *nowhere* in the world to be found, and there is *no one* responsible for it. Anonymous in its identity and dispersed in its structure, what holds us consistently in being is not to be seen, found, or identified. But *second* and even more radically, there is nothing to be said *about* it, either. Recall, in particular, the antinomic result that follows, as we saw above, from the combination of the adequacy of the T-schema and the essential nonexistence of a metalanguage: that there is no articulate and consistent truth about truth, no position from which it is possible to characterize in

¹⁸Of course, there is a whole logical and positional problematic of first-person and indexical reference that is implied here. But, in order to show its bearing on the current problematic of the constitution of the speaking being, it suffices to note that Descartes cannot draw the metaphysical conclusions that he does from it without supposing the reference of the first person pronoun of “I think” to be to an incorporeal interiority, a supposition that is easily defeated by supposing “I” here to have the functioning it evidently does in ordinary intersubjective discourse; see Flew (2002) and Livingston (2018).

¹⁹“Science and Truth,” pp. 864–865.

language the structure of truth as a whole—unless that position be, itself, an inconsistent one. What follows from this is, evidently, that there is no way consistently to articulate the truth of our consistent being: no way to articulate that fact or cause or structure by virtue of which we are held in being, as a “one” and “in time.”

Despite this severe constraint, the requirement of an initial true that operates as the cause of being for a linguistic subject is not avoidable for such a subject. Indeed, as we have seen, this requirement is even necessitated by the formal structure of propositional truth itself insofar as it is implied by the conditional that is operative in the structure of truth. The necessity that is thereby indicated is the necessity of discerning the causation of truth, and it is just here that Lacan insists upon the psychoanalyst’s radical alethic practice in the face of the suffering to which these constraints effectively and necessarily consign us. We suffer, in other words, from not knowing the truth that is the cause of our being. And more than this, the structural results that articulate propositional truth confirm that this unknown truth is not only contingently unavailable but *radically* so, foreclosed in advance from our whole life as speaking subjects or from any coherent possibility of ever appearing there. This self-knowledge that would be required for our unitary ground is forbidden to us, not only because of some peculiar intimacy to ourselves but also, as such and in general, by the very form of reflexivity that is requisite to any possible functioning it could have for a subject. This is the sense in which, as Lacan underscores, the lack implied in the unavailability of a metalanguage—being no Other of the Other—is indeed a *primal* repression. It is a repression of what is not only contingently or in some cases repressed but also rather what we must see ourselves as needing, but cannot have, for deep and radical structural reasons. As such, Lacan suggests it is the root and source of all repressions that arise in the course of our speaking lives, and of all the varied and multiple imaginary and ideological strategies of displacement, substitution, and identification that arise there to cover it over (Lacan 1966, pp. 736–737).

On Lacan’s insistence, it nevertheless remains imperative for psychoanalysis to discern—even if only by “other means”—this radically lacking knowledge in the fact of speech itself and thus in the positional structure of language that gives our life as speaking beings the only positive support

it can have there (Lacan 1966, p. 737). To do this—returning to the constitutive split of the speaking subject between being and knowledge—it is helpful to read in the *cogito*, as Lacan does, the attempted causality of an operation that would, presuming the co-articulability of truth and knowledge that is here rather radically in question, leap over the necessity of speaking and proceed from the fact of thinking directly to the establishment of a whole of knowledge from what appears from its perspective—for example, for Descartes—to be reflexively anchored in its silent interior. Despite the ongoing pervasiveness with which, as Lacan emphasizes throughout “Science and Truth,” the operation of this presumed self-causality of the thinking being continues to ground science, this operation in fact functions only by forgetting what it requires of truth and more specifically of the structure of truth as language. It is then left to psychoanalysis—and herein lies both the distinction and the identity of its subject to that of science—to discern in this structure of discourse *itself* the place of the initial true. But given the dynamism and structural mobility that the necessity of speaking imposes, psychoanalysis will find this initial true nowhere else than wherever it subsists, dispersed, throughout the irreducibly multiple circumstances and instances of a speaking being’s life.

This means, as Lacan notes, that the only sense that can positively be given to the question of the cause of the subject’s being is an irreducibly mobile, structural, and *positional* one. It is here that Lacan, reiterating a positional appeal that he makes in a variety of places, formulates the central imperative of psychoanalysis by quoting the imperative, as Freud puts it, in the penultimate sentence of lecture 31 of his *New Introductory Lectures*: “*Wo es war, soll Ich werden.*” Lacan retranslates thus: “Where it was, there must I come to be as a subject” and emphasizes the way in which the “must” (Freud’s *soll*) there inscribes a paradox, the paradox of an imperative that “presses me to assume [*assumer*] my own causality” (Lacan 1966, p. 734). But where the *cogito* purports to establish this causality—with only the superficially hidden complicity with the assurance of a creator God as its necessary dialectical partner—in the interiority and self-transparency of an ego, it is now left to psychoanalysis to locate it where it alone can find it, in what most radically, after Freud, underlies the life of the speaking subject as such.

Where, then, is this located but in the place of Freud's radical discovery, itself: the place from which I speak without knowing it, the place from which my being as a speaking subject must therefore anchor any claim to its self-consistency, if it has any? This place is the position, as Lacan indicates in "Science and Truth"—referring back to "The Freudian Thing" of 1955—of the unconscious in the radical first-personal form of the enunciation he there imagines for it: "I, truth, speak."

To lend my voice to support these intolerable words, "I, truth, speak..." goes beyond allegory. Which quite simply means everything that can be said of truth, as the only truth—namely that there is no such thing as a metalanguage (as assertion made so as to situate all of logical positivism), no language being able to say the truth about truth, since truth is grounded in the fact that truth speaks, and that it has no other means by which to become grounded.

This is precisely why the unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language, and why I, in so teaching, tell the truth about Freud who knew how to let the truth—going by the name of the unconscious—speak. (Lacan 1966, pp. 736–737)

The initial truth, in which the logic of the signifier and the whole being of the subject it sustains, is nothing other than what is shown in the speech of the unconscious in its own first person: that is the final significance, according to Lacan, of Freud's discovery and the availability of its logic to psychoanalytic praxis. In terms of the structure of propositional truth as articulated by the T-schema, this implies that there is no positioning of this initial true—that truth itself has no origin—other than what is shown in the plural schema itself, in its structural capture of the potential truth of speech. This is shown, in the schema, directly in the quotational/disquotational biconditional structure that forms its backbone: in the logical function of the movement of the sign of the arbitrary proposition into and out of the quotation marks that make it an intelligible content. What radically appears here—but only by displacing anything that could sustain it as a support in being for its function—is the operation of the distinction between the enunciation and the enunciated, on which the specificity of the psychoanalytic operation pervasively

depends. It is then left to the future development of a logic in accordance with this praxis to perceive and mobilize Freud's radical insight into the being of the unconscious as just that structure in which, in the life of a speaking being, a logic that would articulate thinking with being has heretofore dissimulated itself under the formally imposed autocracy of their—presumed or imagined—consistent unity.

Part Three

We have seen how the logical articulation that is given to truth by Tarski's schema serves to indicate the antinomic place at which the unconscious speaks: the place at which any subject gives voice to that which articulates it and yields there any support the subject can have in the linguistic cause of its being. Since this schema also confirms that the unconscious speaks in the place of the constitutive and irremediable split between truth and knowledge, in which the subject is itself constitutively split, it is all the more remarkable that psychoanalysis can aspire to operate as a subjective intervention, exactly on the side of truth there. Such an intervention is, as unavoidably conducted in view of the irremediable split of thinking and being, committed to a logical development that does not propound the unity of these verbs but rather documents their essential incommensurability and develops its consequences. This implies, as I have argued above, a jointly psychoanalytic and logical formal inquiry into just this incommensurability at the constitutive center of the life of a being that speaks and into the forms and structures it propounds for, and imposes on, that life.

In concluding, I wish to gesture toward (and that is all I can do here) some possible questions involved in this inquiry and perhaps indicate some privileged concepts for it to pursue. To begin with, as we have seen, the problematic matter that primarily emerges from the formal consideration of truth—as also from the psychoanalytic posing of the question of the imperative of the subject's grounding in it—is that of *consistency*. In view of the Tarski-Gödel results, it is impossible, in the only language available to a subject, to verify the consistency of that language; for this reason and by that token, it is impossible, as we have seen, for such a

subject to know the consistency which gives it any possible support it could have in being.

In light of this, a practice that sustains itself as an intervention at the point of truth can no longer rely on the ideal of the joint totality and consistency of truth that is thereby shown to be impossible. It follows that it cannot construe the *telos* of truth in a subject's epistemic life in the same way the figure of the subject of science effectively does: namely, as the consistent assertion of the true, or of all that is the case. Nevertheless, if the imperative of a psychoanalytic intervention at the point of truth is to be upheld, the intervention must still hold to the position of a possible knowledge, even in the radical default of any possible guarantee of this knowledge as an assumed identity of thinking and being. And without being able to find *itself*, either in the depths of the subject or anywhere else in the world, this knowledge must nevertheless find a position from which it can speak. The ideal of truth as an idealization of knowledge, or as the regulative ideal of the progress of thinking in pursuit of truth, has to be abandoned, along with the ideal of knowledge itself as the adequate form of the appearance of being in thought. If there is nevertheless a transmissible knowledge here to be secured—and the whole stake of Lacan's method is that there is—it is to be found only insofar as that knowledge can be seen to be produced at the temporally fluid and paradoxical boundary of the subject's consistent unity of speech, in time.

Although I have not centrally discussed the theorization of linguistic meaning here, what I would like, finally, to suggest is that one result of the development of such a formalism might be something like a formally grounded liberation of the productivity of linguistic *sense* from the constraint of a previously assumed knowledge: that is, a liberation of *sense* from any assumption of its secondary status with respect to the beings it effectively presents, either on the side of speaking subjects or on that of their referential objects. To see this in outline, it is helpful to consider briefly a familiar point that arises in the context of analytic theories of meaning, such as those explored by Michael Dummett and Davidson, that employ the Tarskian structure in the interpretation of the semantic structure of natural languages. The familiar point, first made by Dummett in his 1959 article "Truth," is that the provision of the totality of T-sentences for a language does not, and cannot, capture *everything* there

is “to” truth. For even given this extensional totality, we may still lack an understanding of what Dummett calls the “point” of the use of the truth-predicate in the language under consideration: that which its speakers use a truth-predicate to do. Dummett himself draws the conclusion that what is still needed to be introduced is an understanding of the point of the use of a sentence in the practice of assertion, whereby that practice aims at truth. To be aware of such a use, as it is involved (Dummett supposes) in our practice of assertion, is analogous to being aware of the reason for playing games: its aim is that of winning (Dummett 1959, pp. 3–4). The analogy has the upshot that even the adequate extensional specification of the totality of the T-sentences does not suffice to determine uniquely what constitutes meaning for the sentences of the language, and it is here that Dummett himself supposes (maintaining that “meaning depends, ultimately and exhaustively, on use” [Dummett 1959, p. xxi]) that what is needed is simply an understanding of how an ideal of truth is involved in our practice of asserting, as its *telos*.²⁰

While granting the first point (that of the inadequacy of the extensional totality of T-sentences to determine the structure of meaning), we have seen reason in the present considerations to doubt the sufficiency of the second. For we have seen that, in the abeyance of any assurance of the truth-being relationship, it is incoherent to suppose a subject’s assertions to have, in general, the *telos* of an aim toward truth, as the totality of the assertion of all that is the case. This is not simply (to make a point often associated most closely with the later Wittgenstein) because discursive subjects have other aims in speaking, even in those of their activities that involve moments of assertion, than just that of adequately speaking everything that is true. More radically, it is because, as we have seen, the ideal thereby invoked, that of a (consistent) totality of the true, is incoherent.

Insofar as this ideal is invoked to account for the substance of meaning, the invocation must therefore fail to capture adequately the meaning of which a subject’s speech is capable. Just as we cannot expect the point of winning at games to be adequately shown by means of the assumption

²⁰ See Dummett (1973, p. 320) quoted in Priest (2006, p. 61). (See also the discussion of this “teleological account of truth” in Priest [2006, pp. 61–62].)

that it is possible for *everyone* who plays to win, once we have seen the internal reasons for the incoherence of that assumption, it is apparently not logically possible, in the sense of what may count as meaning, for a subject to be adequately explicated by reference to a *telos* of complete consistency that is thereby shown impossible.

For a logic of truth that includes the unconscious, or one that does not dissimulate its radical signifying effects, this appears to mean that there is no way to delimit the productivity of the subject's expression, or the speaking of its truth, by means of whatever assumed or imposed *telos* or assumed unitary intention to assert the totality of the true. Instead of being situated within what is supposed, in accordance with the ideal of that intention, to be the individual subject's intent and general capacity to assert the true, the productivity of sense would then be relocated to the irreducible and even antinomic domain of linguistic structure within which any subject's life would have to be situated.²¹ It must be seen, and is to be expected, rather, that the "meaning" effects of the strategies, ruses and deceptions it propounds in the service of its being in truth, will, even within the starkly delimited constraint that the extensional adequacy of the T-schema provides, recurrently exceed or undermine the boundaries provided by this ideal, which (as we have seen) we cannot, in view of the preceding considerations, take to be coherent.

In this way, one important upshot of the essential incommensurability which we have seen, at the structural core of the subject's discourse between knowledge and truth, might be to allow for a more indicative formalization of the conditions in structure for the plural and undecidable productivity of sense. At the same time, in light of this, on the other side, it is evidently open to the logical inquiry to pursue something like a logical/genealogical investigation, or deconstruction, of the provenance of the One, in the imaginary support of its claim to propound the unity of thinking and being in the presumptive form of the overall unity of knowledge. This second, more deconstructive investigation is indeed legible in Lacan's ongoing interrogation of the privilege of the *cogito* in the constitution of the subject of science, and indeed—in a different and

²¹ Compare Deleuze's statement, and the argument that surrounds it, in *The Logic of Sense*: "Structure is in fact a machine for the production of incorporeal sense..." (1969, p. 71).

more abstract way, though I have not gone into this in depth here—in the logical-syntactic interrogation he suggests in later seminars, such as the far-reaching *Seminar XX*, reflecting on the One in its ultimately Symbolic provenance, at the point of its radical disjunction from its meaning effects.²²

What I have tried to suggest here is just the possible convergence of a logical and formal study of propositional truth, on the one hand, with the profound intervention on truth that, on the other, constitutes the practice of psychoanalysis at the transformative point of Freud's radical discovery of the unconscious. The programmatic study of the One that emerges here is then commended to the formal discipline of the truth-knowledge relationship, that is, to the possible constitution of a science, never before seen, that would sufficiently bear the aspiration to know itself as truth.

This possible constitution does not appear to me to imply any particular consequences for, or within the domain of, any specific empirical science; it has no consequences that I can see, for example, for physics, biology, or psychology as wholes, or for any particular results or phenomena considered therein. These sciences remain, in Lacan's terms, effectively "sutured" in that, however much and by whatever means they seek truth, they do not contain sufficient semantic resources to *reflect* systematically about the form and overall unity of the truth they presume is possible.²³ As we have seen, Lacan himself appears to wish to leave the question of the "scientificity" of psychoanalysis radically open, simultaneously indicating the distance of its foundations from those provided by

²²For example: "We know of no other basis by which the One may have been introduced into the world if not by the signifier as such, that is, the signifier insofar as we learn to separate it from its meaning effects" (Lacan 1973, p. 48). See also: "If the unconscious is truly what I say it is, being structured like a language, it is at the level of language (*langue*) that we must investigate this One. The course of the centuries has provided this One with an infinite resonance. Need I mention here the Neo-Platonists?... We must begin with the fact that this "There's such a thing as One" is to be understood in the sense that there's one all alone (*il y a de l'Un tout seul*)" (Lacan 1973, pp. 63–64). See also Livingston (2012, pp. 76–81).

²³As Badiou admirably demonstrates in *Being and Event*, however, mathematics is not or is no longer (after the series of transformations in foundations in our knowledge of the infinite that he calls the "Cantor-Gödel event") sutured in this sense. The question of the relationship of this event and its chain of consequences within mathematics to a formal-logical analysis of truth of the kind considered here is complex: for some preliminary suggestions see my work (Livingston 2012).

the classical *cogito* as the “subject of science” and, at the same time, indicating its close alliance with, and necessary presupposition of, the formal-scientific methods of logic and formal semantics. But in centrally developing the logical-semantic structure of the signifier insofar as it bears upon a subject’s knowledge, his analysis nevertheless plausibly captures, as we have seen, what is minimally required today of anything worth calling a genuinely materialist understanding of truth’s structure. In a continuation and displacement of this intervention that equally draws on analytic philosophy’s inquiry into formal semantics, this understanding could thus offer to transform, on a rigorously materialist basis, the images of the truth and sense of a life that we ordinarily presuppose and effectively maintain in the everyday practices, circumstances, and institutions of society, politics, and culture.

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authorizes the epistemological break, is of the order of the Freudian death-drive. As anticipated, it consists of the drive to amass a knowledge *that never turns out to be enough*, and which therefore satisfies the drive only by *not* satisfying it, in other words by creating new questions. For this reason, science, like capitalism, is destined *not* to have a human face, no matter how hard we try to lend it ethical dignity.

2

Lacan's University discourse is more ambiguous than it might seem at first sight. It articulates two dimensions of modern science, a kind of front and back of its operativity. On the one hand, it tells us that science is rooted in the Real of *jouissance*, with the master-signifier descending into the place of the unconscious truth of the social discourse; on the other hand, it tells us that science affirms itself as scientism, the "dead knowledge"—impersonal, objective, notional, and encyclopedic—that is imparted in schools and universities as forges of abstract work. Indeed, the exclusion of the master-signifier generates the illusion of the neutrality and objectivity of scientific knowledge. As already pointed out by Martin Heidegger (1977) in *The Question Concerning Technology* with the famous example of the hydroelectric power station built on the Rhine (an example mentioned by Lacan in *Seminar IV*), modern science imposes itself on nature with the desire to make it conform to its own epistemology: in the relationship between technique and nature, it is the scientists' "passionate determination" to know that installs itself as the dominant paradigm.

Lacan, then, addressed modern science both as "positivistic scientism" and as a drive that concerns the historicity of *jouissance* in its potentially antagonistic or revolutionary capacity. If, in the first case, we have a pejorative vision of science as an immense apparatus of rationalization (a "critique of scientific knowledge" that Lacan links to the "Marxian critique of capitalist valorization"), in the second case, we have an epistemology that does not escape but rather embodies the contradiction of the Real since science itself comes to coincide with its acephalous drive. It is clearly to the latter understanding of science that Lacan wants to hook his

“return to Freud,” which is built on the ineradicable conflictuality of the Real.

We can therefore deduce that positivistic scientism fulfills a defensive, even hyper-conservative function with respect to the disruptive drive of scientific epistemology. In this respect, scientism can be seen as the main reason for the success of the COVID-19 narrative, whose “follow-the-science” motto originates in nineteenth-century positivism. Lacan’s interest in science was strongly influenced by Alexandre Koyré’s reading of Newtonian physics and, above all, by his conviction that modern science instigated an epochal spiritual as well as epistemological transformation. What changed for Koyré during the seventeenth century was the very idea of intellectual knowledge, particularly in connection with new theories on the positive character of the infinite (Koyré 2009). Lacan is also indebted to both Gaston Bachelard and his successor at the Sorbonne, Georges Canguilhem, two thinkers who directed him in the rationalist rather than empiricist tradition of the philosophy of science. It is also for this reason that Lacan’s interest in science is characterized, essentially, as an interest in mathematical formalization.

In criticizing the objectivity of modern science for removing the central question of the subject, Lacan also targets the human sciences, in particular empirical branches like behavioral psychology. The error of the human sciences, Lacan argues, is to replace the subject with a “human being” that does not exist. As he put in *Science and Truth*: “There is no such thing as a science of man because science’s man does not exist, only its subject does. My lifelong repugnance for the appellation ‘human sciences’ is well known; it strikes me as the very call of servitude” (Lacan 2006b, p. 730). The human being of the human sciences is understood by Lacan as an entity objectified by supposedly transparent knowledge, which makes humans obedient to experiments, graphs, maps, and surveys. As Jacques-Alain Miller (2002, p. 152) argued:

Therefore, we should not take as a criterion of science what experimental science has believed it can define as scientific in its own case. I must tell you that all that we accept as scientific disciplines in the schools of humanities (*Facultes de Lettres*)—sociology, psychology, medicine—is very often a joke

in the eyes of a mathematician or a physicist. I say this only to make it clear that the concept of science is more complex than simply trying to be objective.

We would be mistaken in considering Lacan an enemy of science. On the contrary, Lacan was convinced that the subject of psychoanalysis can only be understood in a context characterized by the presence of the subject of modern science, rather than simply in relation to the humanistic tradition. For Lacan, the very structure of the psyche emerges within the framework of scientific epistemology. Suffice it to recall that, rather than a pan-sexualist reserve of libido, the Lacanian unconscious is made of a chain of elementary linguistic components (signifiers), which form a discourse that continues to express itself “automatically.” The unconscious is structured by a law that transforms disjointed elements of the individual’s lexicon into language, and, in this way, it represents the archive of an inaccessible signification.

If Lacan is interested in scientific discourse, it is because it allows him to posit a formalization of the Real that has nothing to do with its quantification or objective measurement. It is, as Miller (2002, p. 154) observes, a discourse that requires “an adherence to the signifier insofar as it is separated from all imaginary signification.” This adherence to the signifier stripped of imaginary support is precisely the traumatic adherence of the drive to its own compulsive insistence. It is traumatic to the point of being unsustainable in socio-symbolic terms. For Lacan the advance of modern science is, fundamentally, the progress of this attempt to affirm the “impossible” knowledge of the Real by evacuating all traces of symbolic support—including “God as guarantor of truth,” as Descartes put it in his fourth meditation (Descartes 2008, pp. 38–45). At the same time, however, science uses knowledge as a sort of envelope through which it hopes, in vain, to protect itself from the anxiety that springs from its own drive.

Lacan contends that it is precisely the *traumatic* nature of the scientific revolution that explains the paradox of Isaac Newton’s Kabbalism. While Newton can be regarded as the founder of scientific formalization, which enabled him to achieve “the expulsion of all divine shadows from the heavens,” he is also the one who at the same time goes scouring the sacred

texts to shed light on the project of divine creation, as discussed by Lacan (2006a, p. 171) in *Seminar XVI* (“Newton, who had other things on his mind, also produced a large book ... which is a commentary on the Apocalypse and the prophecy of Daniel”). This seeking refuge in sacred texts testifies to the difficulties encountered by the scientific discourse in accepting the tumultuous novelty it carried within itself. Lacan highlighted this at various points in his seminars. For example, in *Seminar XI*, he claims that, in spite of the revolutions of Descartes and Newton, Comte’s positivism proposes “a religious theory of the earth as a great fetish” (Lacan 1998a, p. 152). Or, in the following year’s seminar, he argues that “the gravitational operation did not seem to him [Newton] to be able to be supported except by this pure and supreme subject, this sort of acme of the ideal subject, which represents the Newtonian god” (Lacan 1964–1965, session of 12 May 1965).

If Newton’s famous methodological principle, *hypotheses non fingo* (i.e., I appeal exclusively to formulas that describe phenomena *without seeking their causes*), represents the epistemological break that brings the scientific signifiers to overlap with the Real, at the same time Lacan observes that this new paradigm would not have been successful without the silent presupposition of the Other. In short, modern science took its first uncertain steps within a “theological envelope.” It had to resort to a “transcendental lever” that allowed it to take root within the social bond. If the scientific discourse was socially legitimized by the big Other, the subject of psychoanalysis can be said to be “internally external” to the scientific discourse. It belongs to it at an epistemological level, but—and this would seem to be the key point—it exceeds it ontologically *by not pretending not to have a hypothesis*: unlike the subject of modern science, the subject of the unconscious really exists without hypothesis, for the simple reason that *it is itself the missing hypothesis*.

To introduce a scientific discourse concerning knowledge, one must investigate knowledge where it is. That knowledge, insofar as it resides in the shelter of language [*lalangue*], means the unconscious. I do not enter there, no more than Newton did, without a hypothesis. My hypothesis is that the individual who is affected by the unconscious is the same individual who constitutes what I call the subject of a signifier. That is what I enunciate in

the minimal formulation that the signifier represents a subject to another signifier. The signifier in itself is nothing but what can be defined as a difference from another signifier. ... To say that there is a subject is nothing other than to say that there is a hypothesis. The only proof we have that the subject coincides with this hypothesis, and that it is the speaking individual on whom it is based, is that the signifier becomes a sign. It is because there is the unconscious ... that the signifier can be called upon to constitute a sign. (Lacan 1998b, pp. 141–42)

3

The discussion of the complex relationship between modern science and the subject of the unconscious was developed by Lacan in the mid-1960s, especially in the well-known *écrit* “Science and Truth.” It was then re-proposed at the beginning of the 1970s, for example, when Lacan maintained that there is a profound but non-definitive affinity between the discourse of science and hysteria. This affinity allows psychoanalysis to reveal how mistaken it is to hope for “a thermodynamic able to provide—within the future of science—the unconscious with its posthumous explanation” (Lacan 1990, p. 19). In other words, the hystericization of the discourse of the Master operated by modern science cannot lead to a scientific explanation of the unconscious since “what Freud articulates as primary process in the unconscious ... isn’t something to be numerically expressed [*se chiffre*], but to be deciphered [*se déchiffre*]. I mean: *jouissance* itself. In which case it doesn’t result in energy, and can’t be registered as such” (Lacan 1990, pp. 18–19). Lacan here insists on a crucial point for his critique of modern science: in its eagerness to measure everything, it misses the *entropic* character of the unconscious.

At the start of *Science and Truth*, Lacan refers to

the decisive change that, with physics paving the way, founded Science in the modern sense, a sense that is posited as absolute. Science’s position is justified by a radical change in the *tempo* of its progress, by the galloping form of its interference in our world, and by the chain reactions that characterize what one might call the expansions of its energetics. In this situation, what seems radical to me is the modification that has occurred in our

subject position [*position de sujet*] in the sense that it is inaugural therein and that science continues to strengthen it ever further. (2006b, p. 726)

A little later, he defines the Cartesian cogito as a “historically defined moment” and an “essential correlate of science”: “This correlate, as a moment, is the defile of a rejection of all knowledge, but is nevertheless claimed to establish for the subject a certain anchoring in being; I sustain that this anchoring constitutes the definition of the subject of science, ‘definition’ to be understood in the sense of a narrow doorway” (Lacan 2006b, p. 727).

On the one hand, scientific discourse is qualified by the attempt to “suture” the subject of the unconscious (thus liquidating the constitutive division of the subject) in order to give shape to an idea of truth founded on logical and tested knowledge (as in Jean Piaget’s studies of child psychology, which Lacan [2006b, p. 730] criticizes, or in the “game theory, better called strategy, which takes advantage of the thoroughly calculable character of a subject strictly reduced to the formula for a matrix of signifying combinations”). On the other hand, however, modern science cannot prevent the return of what it represses, which appears in the form of hysterical questions embodying the division of the subject itself—and, as such, the impotence of scientific knowledge. As in the neurotic structure, the return of the repressed in science testifies to the existence of a contradiction that cannot be resolved by the scientific method.

It is important to reiterate that what is sutured (radically excluded) by modern science is the subject of the unconscious, that is, the subject of psychoanalysis insofar as it is characterized by the constitutive inability to take charge of its own unconscious knowledge. In order to establish its concept of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (correspondence between reason and the external world), science must remove the subject as bearer of unconscious (uncountable) *jouissance*, which in Lacanian terms constitutes the only point of *freedom* for the subject. However, this subject qua freedom, sacrificed at the altar of scientific knowledge, does not leave the scene at all. Rather, as Lacan avers, it returns as the impersonation of the very drive of modern science, which is on a par with capital qua “automatic subject” (Marx 1990, p. 255).

The problem we are approaching here is that of the cause. For Lacan, the cause of the human being is unconscious: it resides in the division/impossibility of the subject as defined by what it cannot recognize about itself. This cause as radical alterity inhabits us and, at the same time, embodies our freedom. As such, it is a truth that cannot be deleted from subjectivity. The only way to eliminate the cause as human truth would be to wipe out humanity itself from the face of the earth. Any endeavor to foreclose it is therefore destined to backfire, including modern science's attempt to turn the human being into an entirely measurable object. The paradox of the cause as truth is that it is lacking, or rather it only manifests itself as a gap or inconsistency in the chain of signification, which is where *jouissance* inscribes itself. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar XI*: "There is cause only in something that doesn't work" [*"Il n'y a de cause que de ce qui cloche"*] (1998a, p. 22). In *Science and Truth*, he adds that the problem of causality is to be understood in relation to a truth that speaks, but *about which it is impossible to tell the truth* since there is no metalanguage. Put differently: only the unconscious, insofar as it is structured by language, tells the truth about truth. But precisely because this point of radical division is the locus of primary repression (*Urverdrängung*), such truth can only emerge as a (traumatic) fall from the fictional construct that makes up any metalanguage: "This lack of truth about truth—necessitating as it does all the traps that metalanguage, as sham and logic, falls into—is the rightful place of *Urverdrängung*, that is, of primal repression which draws toward itself all the other repressions" (Lacan 2006b, p. 737).

Here, then, is "the cause: not the cause as logical category, but as causing the whole effect. Will you psychoanalysts refuse to take on the question of truth as cause when your very careers are built upon it?" (Lacan 2006b, p. 738). In *Position of the Unconscious*, Lacan (2006b, p. 708) states that the cause as truth is introduced by language as the "worm" that divides the subject, in doing so offering it the possibility of structuring itself:

The effect of language is to introduce the cause into the subject. Through this effect, he is not the cause of himself; he bears within himself the worm of the cause that splits him. For his cause is the signifier, without which

there would be no subject in the real. But this subject is what the signifier represents, and the latter cannot represent anything except to another signifier: to which the subject who listens is thus reduced.

On the basis of this articulation of causation as a speaking and structuring truth, but at the same time unconscious and therefore unidentifiable (a veiled point of origin on which science, as a drive, does not reflect), Lacan discusses the knowledge of magic, religion, and science to define the different ways in which they distort the cause as truth (which is ultimately a *material* truth, for it is founded on the materiality of signifiers). On close inspection, here Lacan is rehearsing what was to become, a few years later, his theory of the four (then five) discourses. In distributing the four Aristotelian causes to magic (efficient cause), religion (final cause), science (formal cause), and psychoanalysis (material cause), Lacan anticipates his concept of discourse based on the impossibility or impotence of the cause as truth. As he argues in *Seminar XVII* (Lacan 2007, pp. 164–179), truth is protected by the impotence of the discourse. Unlike psychoanalysis—where the materiality of the signifier embodies the unconscious cause of a given symbolic or imaginary construction—magic, religion, and science invoke a causal relationship that can be reasonably recognized and practiced. In other words, the cause of their discourses (their “knowledge”)—be it a shamanic sacrifice, the God of creation, or the rationality of scientific knowledge—does not have to be repressed or foreclosed in order to assume the character of truth. But precisely because they do not involve the radical division of the subject, these three types of causation remain dependent on an unconscious cause, which underlies them without their realizing it.

Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, can unveil the division that these discourses unknowingly contain. Religion as final cause, for instance, operates not only as a neurotic but also as a perverse structure, where the cause (as radical subjective division/impossibility) is disavowed through the figure of God: “Let us say that a religious man leaves responsibility for the cause to God, but thereby bars his own access to truth. Thus he is led to place the cause of his desire in God’s hands, and that is the true object of his sacrifice” (Lacan 2006b, p. 741). And if science aspires to the *suture* *du sujet*—the elimination of the subject as bearer of truth qua

cause—it is because it proposes to recover truth at the level of logic, in other words as a measurable entity (or, in terms of “economic science,” as value). The exclusion of the subject of the unconscious is what allows for the total measurability of the world. This way, however, the scientific discourse bars itself off from its own cause, which is precisely what psychoanalysis aims at through the identification of the subject with its unconscious (Real) symptoms. This identification with one’s own unconscious substance is what allows for the momentary separation from the Other, thereby opening the way to the reconfiguration of subjectivity (subjective freedom).

Obviously, the encounter with the Real of *jouissance* that Lacanian psychoanalysis posits as its ultimate task is, strictly speaking, *a missed encounter*. That is to say, it has to do with the signifier of the lack (impossibility, incompleteness) of/in the Other. It should be added that while the problem of causality qua truth tends to disappear in the scientific discourse, it is replaced by its more anodyne version of “correlation.” This is because, in questioning the cause, modern science encounters nothing less than its own impasse, namely, the ultimate impossibility of describing reality as a closed universe of cause-effect relations. The bottom line here is that the deterministic epistemology that dominates “capitalist science” is based on the *ejection* of the truth as cause. Despite the discoveries of quantum mechanics and thermodynamics in the twentieth century, which restore the notion of truth to the dignity of a missed encounter or “impossible cause” (coterminous, in Lacanian terms, with a Real encounter), capitalist science develops its own variety of commodity fetishism. That is to say, of perversion.

Now, if on the one hand Lacan relates the repression of the unconscious truth in scientific knowledge to a neurotic effect of an obsessive or hysterical kind, since the repressed (truth as cause) returns as the question that continues to drive science, on the other hand he also conceives of repression in much more radical terms: “science does-not-want-to-know--anything about the truth as cause” (Lacan 2006b, p. 742). In other words, Lacan proposes that the suturing of the subject operated by modern science might correspond to the Freudian *Verwerfung*, the foreclosing of the Name of the Father: what is rejected here, *without the possibility of symbolic returns*, is the master-signifier, the signifier of symbolic castration

that oversees the efficiency of the process of elementary abstraction on which any subjective or social identity is based.

Here, then, the impasse of scientific knowledge is linked to the structure of psychosis. More precisely, the scientific discourse would give rise to a *paranoid* type of subjectivity, insofar as paranoid psychosis, which is a central category in Lacan, is based on the delusional image of a cohesive and consistent subject who projects the perception of its own uncastrated structure into the field of the Other. For this reason, any imperfection or inconsistency in the Other transforms any external agent into a potentially evil entity pervaded by persecutory *jouissance*. Here, however, comes a crucial twist. Alluding to a Freudian aphorism (Freud 1993, p. 221), Lacan conjectures that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, modern science could be compared to a case of “successful paranoia” (Lacan 2006b, p. 742) since the Name-of-the-Father is foreclosed *and yet the scientific discourse seems to function*. As argued by Scott Wilson in a piece on Lacan’s concept of successful paranoia: “we can say that our epoch—insofar as it is determined by the applications of scientific discourse in conjunction with capitalism—is relatively stable insofar as beliefs persist in the consistency and utility of scientific knowledge that, as the history of science demonstrates, is a locus of delusion and error” (Wilson 2017, pp. 4–5). However, despite the seemingly unstoppable convergence of science and truth, Lacan also suggests that, since “psychoanalysis is essentially what brings the Name-of-the-Father back into scientific examination” (Lacan 2006b, p. 743), science’s successful paranoia can be debunked.

If we transpose the above discussion into our “Covid times,” it seems vital to emphasize the relationship between the Lacanian hypothesis concerning the psychotic propensity of modern science and my argument that the Capitalist discourse, historically grafted onto the episteme of modern science, guarantees a minimally neurotic “correction” of the normalized psychotic structure of the scientific discourse. That said, the debate surrounding the “curious copulation” between science and capitalism today needs to be updated. The irredeemable decline of the “work society” means that the buffer provided by the capitalist structure, based on the neurotic gratifications of work, consumption, and their politics, is growing so thin that it now has no choice but to co-opt science *directly*.

The extraordinary expansion of Big Pharma is a clear indication that science itself is now over-determined by the capitalist matrix.

If capitalist societies are losing their symbolic efficiency (their capacity to structure people's lives around a work-based, consumerist *Weltanschauung*), capital is responding by turning science into a great fetish. My hypothesis is that the COVID-19 psychodrama owes its *ideological* success to capitalism's direct intervention into the scientific field, aimed at securing its status as a "successful paranoia." Aside from providing a stream of potentially infinite profits, the deep structural function of the medical world governance managing COVID-19 is to generate the illusion that "capitalist science" is infallible. How? By supplementing the intrinsically psychotic structure of modern science with a strong dose of commodity fetishism. This way, for the first time in their history, capital and science form *one global discourse* where paranoid psychosis is indistinguishable from fetishism (perversion). However, while this strategy is ingenious, it is bound to backfire.

* * *

As Lacan (1978, p. 36) claimed in his 1972 Milan talk, the Capitalist discourse is "madly clever, but destined to burst" (*follement astucieux, mais voué à la crevaison*). Lacan understood that a fundamental division is at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. On the one hand, the strength of contemporary capitalism lies in shrewdly affirming itself as a positive value, ultimately coincidental with its purchasing power. Yet, while consumerist utopia provides a socially and existentially affirmative ground for the capitalist narrative to expand, at the same time Lacan suggests that a "puncture" (*crevaison*) is guaranteed, sooner or later, to grind the Capitalist discourse to a halt. It seems to me no coincidence that this prediction was formulated at the start of the 1970s, when the socially binding power of capitalism began to clash with capital's nascent structural inability to reproduce itself by creating new surplus-value (crisis of the Fordist mode of production).

As anticipated, I propose that the drive of modern science became hegemonic only by anchoring itself to capitalism, which operates the

systematic conversion of this drive into abstract labor, and thus into economic value. In other words, capitalism affirms itself as a social ontology through its promise to provide discursive balance to the disruptive drive of modern science, activating a metaphysics of desire based on commodity fetishism. In this respect, the instability of the scientific drive, which enters the modern world like an earthquake, is mediated not so much by the reactivation of outdated ideological systems based on ethics, politics, or religion, but by that *new secular cult* (to take up once again Walter Benjamin's fertile intuition) whose name is capitalism.

However, with the structural crisis of valorization since the 1970s, rooted in capital's growing inability to generate new surplus-value due to unprecedented technological automation (Feldner and Vighi 2015; Kurz 2016), the *fetish-character of capital* must be accentuated to compensate for the slow but inevitable implosion of the "work society." Hence the "financial turn" of contemporary capitalism, increasingly dependent on the sleights of hand of the speculative sector and attendant asset bubbles. Put differently, the incestuous relationship between science and capital results in the affirmation of the *perverse* logic of "emergency capitalism." The ongoing implosion of global capitalism has given rise to a perpetual "state of emergency," whose latest manifestation is COVID-19 (followed by the Ukrainian war). COVID-19 is an *instrumentum regni* of immense magnitude that in all likelihood will be replicated at every given opportunity (e.g., through the use of "scientific evidence" supporting climate lockdowns or similar restrictions). This is because contemporary capitalism can avoid collapse only by reproducing its conditions of possibility by authoritarian (or totalitarian) means. And the acceleration toward a dystopian capitalist future akin to a monetary fiefdom (where the production of money out of thin air by central banks powers all economic exchanges) involves the re-engineering of our identities from *consumer-centered* to *legally disenfranchised*.

Here, "capitalist science" plays a crucial role. While the relentless pathologizing of life continues to serve the profit-making dogma, it also seeks to destroy the last remnants of collective resistance to the installation of a new tyrannical regime of bio-technological accumulation. Virology can now be seen as a capitalist category through and through. The coronavirus health emergency should be regarded, first and foremost,

as a monetary event. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (see Vighi 2021), its immediate function was to allow the Federal Reserve to rescue Wall Street from crashing by injecting trillions of dollars into the financial sector through extraordinary asset purchase programs. Because of its exceptional magnitude, the latter intervention could only be accomplished by turning Main Street off, or, as recommended by the Bank of International Settlements in summer 2019, by finding a way to “insulate the real economy from further deterioration in financial conditions” (De Fiore and Tristani 2019). SARS-CoV-2 was essential to save hyper-financialized capitalism from collapsing—but at what price?

In this respect, going back to Lacan’s quote from 1974, there can be little doubt that medicine today appears to be more obscurantist than religion. The aim of the recent global health emergency is to reproduce old and current social relations (owners of the means of production vs. sellers of labor-power) as an ultra-financialized system of social castes. Ultimately, the respiratory virus known as SARS-CoV-2 functions as a decoy, the equivalent of what Alfred Hitchcock called a MacGuffin. Under the pretext of biosecurity, we have been coerced into endorsing a capitalist *coup* that will condemn most of us to immiseration and (voluntary) servitude. Yet, as Lacan reiterated, modern science remains, at heart, a *drive* fueled by its doubts, its frustrations, its deeply unsatisfactory knowledge. As such, at a fundamental level it is irreducible to manipulation by the corporate-owned pharmaceutical industry. Virology itself (and microbiology more generally) may well be on the cusp of a paradigm shift, as viruses and bacteria continue to be debated not only as intrinsically pathogenic enemies poised to attack us, but also as consequences of existing pathological conditions and therefore of physiological cellular metabolism.

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