

PSYCHOANALYSIS: A NON-ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN

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Loin donc que la folie soit le fait contingent des
fragilités de son organisme, elle est la virtualité
permanente d'une faille ouverte à son essence. [...]
Et l'être de l'homme, non seulement ne peut être
compris sans la folie, mais il ne serait pas l'être de
l'homme s'il ne portait en lui la folie comme la
limite de sa liberté.

Parce que de là où nous vivons, la nature ne
s'impose pas.
Jacques Lacan¹

1. Today's ontologies

Today, entitling a theory an ontology is far from being 'politically incorrect'. Publications featuring expressions such as 'cultural ontology' "ontology of mind", "social ontology", are no longer exceptional in the field of social sciences.² Even critical theory is seduced by the term. Is one of Žižek's major works, *The Ticklish Subject*, not subtitled "The Absent Centre of Political Ontology"? Also the conference underlying the present volume was originally entitled "Psychoanalytical *ontology of the human*".³ Ontology is 'in'. Again. Also in psychoanalysis.

Does this mean that psychoanalysis and other theories have undergone a kind of Heideggerian turn? That they are introducing the necessary question of being ("die [notwendige⁴] Frage nach dem Sein") into their way of thinking? That they now organize their λόγος ('logos') on the basis of the question of το ὄν ('to on'); and that, consequently, they interpret the question of the human as the question of *Dasein*, i.e. of the place where being and its question *is*, i.e. where it happens, occurs, takes place?

¹ For the first motto above the text, see: Jacques Lacan (1966), *Écrits*, Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, p. 176. For the second motto, see: Jacques Lacan (1981), *Les non-dupes errent: notes intégrales du séminaire 1973-1974*, Paris: Publication hors commerce par L' Association Freudienne Internationale, p. 165 (leçon de 21 mai 1974).

² Wilhelm Dupré & Inigo Bocken (Eds.) (2002), *On Cultural Ontology: Religion, Philosophy and Culture: Essays in Honor Wilhelm Dupré*, Maastricht: Shaker; Helen Steward (1997); *Ontology of Mind: Events, Processes and States*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; David Weissman; *A Social Ontology*: New Haven: Yale University Press. Even in theology, ontology is 'in': cf. John Milbank (2003), *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, London and New York: Routledge.

³ "The Psychoanalytical Ontology of the Human", conference organized by the *Centre of Research in Modern European Philosophy* of the Middlesex University, London, January 20th and 21th, 2004.

⁴ *Sein und Zeit* opens with a reflection concerning "Die Notwendigkeit einer ausdrücklichen Wiederholung der Frage nach dem Sein" (Martin Heidegger [1972], *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, p. 2).

Not exactly. Heidegger is rather absent in contemporary social sciences, certainly in those that call themselves ontologies. Even in philosophy, he is no longer very alive. Today's ontologies do not refer to the way *Sein und Zeit* used the term almost a century ago. It is no longer a reference to a *question*, to the question concerning whether we are able to talk about being at all, or what it means that the question of being is itself a kind of being as well. We use ontology in a more literal and – at least at first sight – less problematic way: as a λόγος ('logos') about το όν ('to on'): a discourse about what is. Yet, this unproblematic definition keeps the real 'ontological' question hidden: whether that 'logos' (discourse, theory, et cetera) are about what is, i.e. about the real state of things; whether it is confirmed by and based upon this state of things, upon 'real facts'. A positive answer is at least implicitly presumed by many current 'ontological' theories, but rarely if ever questioned.

The ontological claim characterizing many social sciences must be connected to today's hegemony of life sciences or, more exactly, biological sciences. The answers to our psychological, sociological, cultural, and even religious problems⁵ are supposed to be found, at least partially, in evolutionary psychology and in the neurosciences. There, we are supposed to find the 'ontological' basis of human behavior and feeling, and even the ultimate ontological basis of our thought as such. This is certainly the way social science – and science as such – is referred to in the media. The sciences are supposed to provide an insight into the real state of things. In other words, they are supposed to be 'ontologies'.

No wonder psychoanalysis too is now defined as an 'ontology of the human'. That is why the neurosciences and Freudian theory should no longer be considered as opposed to one another. Was Freud himself not a neurologist – a 'biologist of the mind', as Frank Sulloway⁶ already put it in 1979? And was Freud not the writer of the *Entwurf einer Psychologie*⁷, a "psychology" which was in fact nothing else than a blueprint for the functioning of the neuronal system? Is this not the real basis for the unconscious Freud's psychoanalysis talks about? Is this not the domain of what Antonio Damasio calls "emotions", which form the biological, neurological ground of our "feelings", of what we commonly call "the mind".⁸ Are unconscious "emotions" not the ontological basis for conscious "feelings"?

⁵ See, for instance, Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili and Vince Rause (2001), *Why God Won't Go Away*, New York: Balantine Books.

⁶ Frank J. Sulloway (1979), *Freud: Biologist of the Mind*, New York: Basic Books.

⁷ Sigmund Freud (1987), *Gesammelte Werke. Nachtragsband*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, p. 375-447; S. Freud, (1950 [1895]), "Project for a Scientific Psychology", in: *Standard Edition Vol. I*, London, Hogarth Press, 283-397.

⁸ Antonio Damasio (2003), *Looking for Spinoza – Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*, Orlando (Fla): Harcourt.

2. The Axiom of Psychoanalysis

Here, one must recall the crucial import of ‘Freud’s discovery of the unconscious’. For his ‘Copernican revolution’ is not so much the discovery of a “dark, unknown continent”, nor its establishing as a proper object of science. The unconscious is not so much a scientific object as the *fundamental condition* for science as such. It does not so much provide a deeper insight into the neurological (ontological) emotions behind the ‘mind-like’ (fictional) feelings. It is rather a redefinition of ‘insight’ itself. It is a revolutionary turn, not concerning thought’s object, but of *thought itself – of what thinking and knowing is supposed to be*.

According to psychoanalysis, knowledge is built upon a radical unknowing. Indeed, here, the unconscious is thought as radical: it characterizes knowledge’s ‘radix’, its basic condition. It is not something science still fails to know, but that which it will never know, except as the condition for its own knowing. Certainly, Freud’s psychoanalysis knows a lot and is often more clever than most current psychological theories, but it does not do so with the ‘certainty’, the “*certitude*”, which has been, since Descartes, the paradigm of scientific knowledge. Freudian psychoanalysis is a profound critique of the possibility of such kind of certainty, and, thus, a critique of the Cartesian fundamentals of modern science.

In the final analysis, according to psychoanalysis, knowledge has no hold over itself: i.e. over its own ground, its ‘*hypokeimenon*’, its ‘*subjectum*’, its subject.⁹ Of course, we long for a definite and certain knowledge, but psychoanalysis claims that this very longing turns out to be knowledge’s only basis. Knowledge can never overcome its own unfulfilled desire (for knowledge). Against Descartes, psychoanalysis redefines science as a doubt – and, thus, a knowledge – that has *no ground in itself*. It is incapable of knowing the ground – the ‘subject’ – of its own doubting and knowing. The subject of knowledge is not knowable or, which amounts to the same thing, it’s the subject of the unconscious. A sure and firm self-conscious subject – i.e. a knowledge knowing its own basis – is impossible.

Since Lacan, that subject – the ground or foundation of knowledge, including scientific knowledge – is known to be ‘decentered’, ‘destituted’; which he develops by claiming that we will never be able to appropriate our *desire* (for knowledge) as the very

⁹ I refer to the Aristotelian notion of ‘hypokeimenon’ (in Latin, translated as ‘subjectum’), a notion from his logics which means support, ‘bearer’ of qualities. This ‘logical’ term has been ‘ontologized’ in late Antiquity, characterizing being as such, i.e. ‘being’ as being its own bearer, its own ‘subjectum’. In Christian Medieval thought, this kind of ontologized subject was defined as God, being’s Creator. With Descartes and modernity, ‘subject’ is defined as the bearer of man’s relation to being. In its quality of ‘substance’, this subject is still ontological. As is explained in what follows, Freudian and Lacanian theory can be considered as attempts to ‘de-ontologize’ the Cartesian modern subject.

ground – the subject – of our desire (or our knowledge). The ‘*topos*’ from where we know – or, more exactly, desire to know – escapes any knowledge. The incapacity of appropriating the subject of our knowledge: this is the core of the Freudian unconsciousness; the makes the subject to be defined as ‘the subject of the unconscious. And, last but not least, this incapacity – this unconscious – is not a regrettable deficiency in the human faculty of knowledge; it is its very condition.

Need we be reminded that this is not the result of Freud’s *empirical* research into the drive, but rather a consequence of his *conceptual, axiomatic* revision of the very notion of drive? The former is what Freud undertook while working at the Viennese university in Theodor Meynert’s neurology lab. There, he carried out experiments investigating how organisms react to stimuli, and tried to fit his conclusions into a broader neurological theory, including a theory of the drive. But once excluded from that lab¹⁰, Freud was obliged to work in a quite different environment. The object of his scientific research now coincided with the object of his *therapeutic practice*: he had to treat neurotic patients – hysterics, whom he had already encountered during his stay in Paris with Charcot. And being disappointed by the then prevailing theories of hysteria, Freud endeavored to elaborate a better one himself.

Here, Freud’s most important experiment was an ‘*experimentum mentis*’, an experiment at the *paradigmatic* or *axiomatic* level of his scientific approach. In order to understand what a hysterical patient was doing and (especially) saying, one had to mobilize a paradigm that differed from the accepted neurological and biological one: this was Freud’s intuition. The biological paradigm maintained that, in principle, life was not ‘animated matter’ – the *active* ‘formation’ (animation) of *passive* ‘matter’ – as Aristotle maintained; nor an autonomously functioning machine inhabited by a ‘ghost’, as Descartes and 17th Century materialism thought. 19th Century life-science defined life as a reaction to stimuli, a paradigm which remains the dominant paradigm in today’s life-sciences, as well as in the social sciences and other “ontologies of the human”.

Freud’s new theory did not break with this paradigm *as such*. According to him too, life is not to be approached as an essence (an Aristotelian ‘*anima*’; a Cartesian mechanical ‘*res extensa*’), but as a radically ‘superficial’ phenomenon. Whatever does not react to stimuli is inorganic, ‘dead’; the organic is what reacts to stimuli.¹¹ Thus far, Freud is in agreement

¹⁰ Being a Jew and refusing to convert to Catholicism, Freud was not allowed to build up a career in the Austrian academic system, where anti-Semitism was widely ruling.

¹¹ Jean Starobinski (2003), *Action and Reaction. The Life and Adventures of a couple*, translations by Sophie Hawkes with Jeff Fort, New York: Zone Books. For the preliminary lines of thought leading towards the formation of this paradigm, see: Georges Canguilhem (1955), *La formation du concept de reflexe au XVIIe et*

with 19th (and 20th/ 21st) century life-sciences. But he did not agree with the *principle* of reaction, and only here do we encounter the crucial novelty of psychoanalytical theory. For current life-sciences, the reaction principle – or, what amounts to the same thing, the drive principle – is self-preservation: an organism reacts in order to preserve the life-form it has, and it only changes (in this case: mutates) its life-form when ordered to by the imperative of self-preservation. Freud, too, considers human life as ‘reacting on stimuli’ and recognizes ‘self-preservation’ as its principle. Yet, he immediately adds a second, antagonistic – or, so to say, ‘deconstructive’ – ‘pleasure principle’. This is at least the new paradigm he feels forced to presume when he faces human ‘psychic’ trouble. A neurotic symptom, such as Anna O.’s paralysis, for instance, can, according to Freud, only be understood by taking into account that she takes pleasure in what she (nevertheless) says is hurting her. Freud interprets that ‘pleasure’ not as an epiphenomenon of the principle of self-preservation. For him, it is *as such* a principle as well, disturbing, ‘perverting’, ‘deconstructing’ the other principle. So, in his eyes, a neurotic symptom is the result of a persisting conflict between two opposing principles, the ‘*Ich-triebe*’ (‘ego-drives’) and the libido (pleasure principle). When, later, Freud replaces this opposition by a new one distinguishing ‘pleasure principle’ and ‘reality principle’, it is clear that for him ‘pleasure’ – i.e. the principle ‘perverting’ the life-functions – is most basic.¹²

So, Freud’s basic supposition says that, on its most fundamental level (the level where it is mere reaction on stimuli), life is not lived out of self-preservation but out of ‘*Lust*’: lust, pleasure. Applied to lower animal species, it might be not that convincing, but applied to human behavior, it makes a huge amount of phenomena more readable. Apparently, ‘pleasure’ sounds still the antique ‘hèdonè’-principle, but now it is not only deprived of its essentialist interpretation (as was the case with Aristotle), but also from any reference to ‘self’ and self-preservation (as is supposed in current life-sciences). This makes the pleasure principle undoubtedly the most central, but at the same time the most axiomatic concept of psychoanalytical theory. On the most profound level, life is lived, not to be preserved, but

XVIII^e siècle, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; Edwin Clarke & L.S. Jacnyan (1960), *Nineteenth Century Origins of Neuroscientific Concepts*, Los Angeles, Berkeley: University of California Press. For Freud’s use of this biological paradigm, see Jean Laplanche (1998 [1980]), *Problématiques I*, Paris : Quadrige / Presses Universitaires de France, p. 182 ff.

¹² This is why Freud considers the pleasure principle as prevailing over the reality principle. See his famous essay “Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” (S. Freud [1953; 1974], *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XII, p. 213-226; [1975], *Studienausgabe*, Bd. III: *Psychologie des Unbewußten*, p. 13-24. For a comment on this essay, see : Jean Laplanche (1994 [1987], *Nouveaux fondements pour la psychanalyse*, Paris: Quadrige / Presses Universitaires de France, p. 27-28. See also Jacques Derrida, “Spéculer sur «Freud»” in : (19 80), *La carte postale de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, p. 301.

because of the pleasure it gives. This is not to say that, according to Freud, pleasure and self-preservation exclude one another. Most of the time, acts of pleasure are self-preserving, but in principle, they are done because of the pleasure they give. That is why it is possible to do things *only* for pleasure, not for purposes of self-preservation at all. Smoking for instance can illustrate this (not prove: you cannot prove an axiom). Pleasure ‘perverts’ the supposed self-preserving tendency of life. In the end, it is in the name of pleasure that we are able to destroy our lives as well as the lives of others. Pure pleasure ultimately implies the death of the organism driven by it. Freud’s death-drive can be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the pleasure principle, and therefore (despite the endless criticism it continues to endure) as one of psychoanalysis’ most crucial concepts.¹³

At least, this is the axiom from which Freud’s ‘experimentum mentis’ proceeds in order to understand what is going on in the mind of the hysteric. Once again, it is an *axiom*, rather than the result of an empirical enquiry. It is not the object of observation; it is a presupposition guiding the observation and its interpretation. In other words, you cannot observe the pleasure principle. Similarly, there can be no empirical observation of the self-preservation principle as such. Principles like these are simply basic assumptions on the basis of which phenomena can be read and interpreted. Living phenomena, ‘read’ as reactions to stimuli, can be interpreted either according to the primacy of the self-preservation principle or of the pleasure principle. Such principles name the point *from where* ‘facts’ can be read, but they can never be proved as ‘facts’ themselves.¹⁴

When Elisabeth von R., one of Freud’s first patients, talked abundantly about the many symptoms she suffered from, Freud experienced that those were not so much painful obstacles on her way to a balanced self-preservation, as things she secretly enjoyed. Psychoanalysis started from the moment Freud discovered that, for the patient, complaining

¹³ This is the background to Freud’s idea of life as an “erotisation of death”. If life is pleasure (life being reaction to stimuli), and if pleasure is the expulsion of ‘unpleasure’ (since every stimulus is by definition primarily distortion, ‘unpleasure’), then life is the expulsion of all excitation and, in that sense, of life. So life is ultimately driven by a ‘death-drive’. This is why, in fact, the other principle, Eros, is the most ‘difficult’ and enigmatic principle, for it does what, according to the logic of pleasure, is illogical: it beholds the excitation caused by the stimuli. And most enigmatic of all is the relation between Eros and death: this relation is more complex than a dialectical one. The dialectical relation is characteristic of the tension of Eros, which has to bind an energy that is in principle unbinding. ‘Death’ is the principle *beyond* this. Strictly speaking, ‘death’ is the non-principle governing pleasure-life. It deconstructs life at the level of its principle. It is the ‘deadly’ pleasure, which is always already converted into Eros – ‘erotized’. But this ‘erotization’ never completely neutralizes or appropriates death’s force. That is why ‘death’ can only be traced as a remainder, a non-erotized remainder, a “residue” of Eros’ dialectical economy (this is, for instance, the basic scheme underlying Freud’s argument about the cruelty of moral consciousness in chapter VII of *Civilisation and its discontent*; see: Freud [1974], *Studien Ausgabe, Band IX, Fragen der Gesellschaft – Ursprünge der Religion*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, p. 250 ff.).

¹⁴ So, empiricism too is based on an axiom and not on the empirical facts it discerns.

itself was a pleasure. For, every time Freud successfully cured one of Elisabeth's symptoms, again and again, she reinvented other symptoms. Only when he assumed a kind of pleasure at work in the very *relation* to her symptoms, was he able to discover her real problem. Freud discovered pleasure as a *principle* only from the moment that he understood pleasure, not as something which was lost and repressed, but as *the very principle of the repressing reaction itself*. Just like any activity, repression too is itself guided by pleasure. This is why the patient – and every normal neurotic person, including the psychoanalyst himself – unconsciously enjoys the symptoms he consciously says to suffer from. This unconscious enjoyment is his real problem. Our symptoms are 'problems' or 'problemata' (προβλήματα), in the Ancient Greek sense of the word¹⁵: things thrown (blèma) in front of us (pro); things which, although we cannot really handle them, we use as a shield against our complex and 'tragic' condition, which cannot be reduced to a 'problem' (in the normal, solvable sense of the word) and which is so to say our 'unnatural nature'; or, in Lacanian terms, our "*manque à être*", our "lack of being", our castration from the real.¹⁶

Born in complete helplessness and living from 'pleasure', the human child is not able to gain that pleasure himself, nor is there anything else in the real which *spontaneously* and *immediately* satisfies his request for 'pleasure'. Yet, the child will have to do *as if* it gains pleasure from the world it lives in and the others it lives with. Libidinal life, thus, coincides with an economy full of tricks and ruses in order to outwit this primordial impasse and to replace a missing *immediate* pleasure relation by a *mediate* relation to reality.

This is why we relate to reality never in simple, but always in a *complex* way. It implies a kind of distorted dialectic between pleasure and its opposite. This is what Freud conceptualizes as the *Oedipus complex*, which is not so much a 'phase' we go through, as the persisting libidinal 'grammar' of our relation to the world (as well as to ourselves). This 'grammar' decrees that, if pleasure is the principle of our relation to the world, this relation is by definition double and contradictory. Because nothing in the world directly responds to the pleasure we want to gain from it, we initially 'hate' the world. However, being born too prematurely, the little child has never succeeded in being the bearer (the subject) of this 'hate'. In fact, he gets the pleasure he lives from, from the other (the mother or any other adult). When the child experiences excitations, i.e. unpleasure, there is always the other who guarantees the required pleasure. In this sense, the new born child denies any experience of

¹⁵ For a reflection upon the Ancient Greek sense of the word '*problema*', see Jacques Derrida (1993), *Passions*, Paris, Galilée, p. 26 ff.; English translation in: David Wood (ed.) (1992), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford (UK) / Cambridge (US): Blackwell, p. 11 ff.

¹⁶ Lacan 1966: 655, 667.

the outside world; it denies experience *as such*. For experience supposes a difference between the one experiencing and the thing experienced. But since the child lives by the pleasure ‘immediately’ given by the others, it is not interested in experiencing the world. And if it is *forced* to experience the world around him – if only because his senses (his eyes, his ears, his tactility) come open – then it would hate that world. Yet, the child cannot lay claim to his hatred; there is still not such a thing as a ‘child’, an ‘I’, a ‘subject’ to be the bearer of that hate. This hate needs to be repressed, which in this case is done by its reverse, love, so Freud postulates in his conceptualization of the ‘Oedipus complex’. For, being the child’s life principle, pleasure *must* be gained at any cost – a procedure which coincides with the emergence of the unconscious. Thus, hate becomes the unconscious ground for love, or, what amounts to the same, hate gets repressed by love.¹⁷

This pleasure based Oedipal ‘love’ implies a kind of ‘fundamental lie’ about reality. We repress our initial hatred of reality and transform the hated universe into a loved one. Our basic trust in reality rests upon that basic lie about the real. So, since experience as such is originally traumatic, the reality we (unconsciously hate and, then) love cannot be the *real* one, it is always already in advance re-interpreted by the pleasure principle. Nor can the life we live be real and natural, since pleasure precedes our ‘natural’ relation to life, and subverts or perverts it. In a way, it makes us ‘naturally unnatural’. Obviously, we are natural in that we need to eat, drink, sleep, etc.¹⁸; this is what Freud called the “*Not des Lebens*”: the basic needs to be fulfilled.¹⁹ But being libidinal, we are always already ‘perverting’ those needs. Of course our life-functions are biological, but they are *not lived* biologically. It is, so to say, our nature to ‘pervert’ nature. We live our biological functions, not for their biological profits (as evolutionary psychology for instance claims), but for the pleasure we gain from them. In the final analysis, we do not eat to stay alive, but because of the pleasure eating gives us; because of a lust to eat. That is why we can use this function to eat literally “anything” we like (bulimia), or to eat the ‘nothing’ we like (anorexia nervosa). That is also why we do not make love for the purpose we suppose lovemaking was designed for by nature. Why should we

¹⁷ This makes Freud, in a famous sentence from *Triebe und Triebchicksale*, say that “in relation to the object, hatred is older than love” (“Der Haß ist als Relation zum Object älter als die Liebe”, in: Sigmund Freud [1975], *Studien Ausgabe, Band III, Psychologie des Unbewussten*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, p. 101).

¹⁸ It would be wrong to add ‘fucking’ to this list. For sexuality (including genital sexuality) is not what we ‘need’. It must be defined as something which is beyond the logic of need. This is precisely the kernel of perversity, to which psychoanalysis gives “droit de cité” (as Lacan says in his seminar on ethics; J. Lacan [1986], *Le séminaire. Livre VII: L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Galilée, p. 229). Sexuality perverts our ‘natural’ needs. In the ‘sexuation’ of oral and anal functions, there is still a link with natural functioning. In the sexuation of the genital function, the link with its natural functioning (with fertility) is totally gone.

¹⁹ For the notion of “*Not des Lebens*”, see S. Freud (1972), *Studienausgabe, Band II: Die Traumdeutung*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, p. 538-540.

make such an effort to prevent ‘natural’ fertility in the sexual games we play, if those games were basically ‘natural’? In short, if pleasure is life’s purpose, life is never lived naturally. Life is lived libidinally: as ‘polymorphically perverting’ life.

3. Psychoanalysis: a non-ontology of the human

Is psychoanalysis ontology? Does ‘polymorphic perversity’, ‘pleasure principle’, ‘death drive’ – and all the other basic concepts of its psychoanalytical ‘*logos*’ – say something about being, about ‘*to on*’? And is what is said with these concepts embedded in – and thus confirmed by – being?

Here, Lacan takes a very clear position claiming that psychoanalysis is definitely not ontology. Since it says nothing about the ontological level of human life, psychoanalysis cannot be defined as an “ontology of the human”. On the contrary, the very core of its theory asserts the libidinal character of the human, claiming that the latter is defined by pleasure, which implies a perversion affecting its ontological status. Being – in the ontological sense – is only the *object* of pleasure, never its *subject*. We enjoy being, but (unlike classical, for instance Aristotelian metaphysics) enjoyment and pleasure have no base in being. Pleasure has no ontological (‘natural’, ‘real’) bearer; it is a purely formal principle perverting any supposed ontological ground. Pleasure’s ‘ground’ can only be *fictional*. It is the fictional point where the entire pleasure economy of the libidinal apparatus is supposed to be centralized and where the ‘pleasure account’ registers the profit. This fictional ‘point’ is to be identified with the ‘subject’, i.e. with the point *from* which we live our (libidinal) live.

If someone suffers from a mental disease, there is something wrong with his pleasure life, so psychoanalytical theory claims. The cause of his or her disease is not to be found in something real (i.e. ontological), but in the intrinsically perverse relation to real being. Its cause is not ‘objective’, but ‘subjective’. Of course, mental diseases can have something to do with bodily, physical causes, but they cannot be reduced to them. Specifically mental causes exist.

Here, we encounter one of the starting points of Lacanian theory. Remember the text Lacan wrote for the “organicist” neuro-psychiatrist Henri Ey: “*Propos sur la causalité psychique*”, “Remarks on mental causation”.²⁰ In this text, Lacan fully expresses his admiration for his fellow psychiatrist Henry Ey, but nevertheless mercilessly criticizes his

²⁰ Lacan 1966 : 151-193. Lacan goes into Henry Ey’s “organicism” at p. 152 ff.

neuro-psychiatric theory. For Lacan, the ground of mental disease is not a neuronal dysfunction, as Ey claims, but something mental, psychical, subjective.

But does this kind of subjective, mental or psychical cause have some sort of ontological ground? This was the thesis of pre-modern and early modern theories. In Aristotelian-Thomist medieval philosophy, the ‘psyche’ was a scientific term with a clear ontological ground, i.e. the human soul animating the body. More precisely, it was the ‘*anima*’ providing the passive material side of the human being with its active form. With Descartes, the psyche lost its animating function, but was still an ontologically based *Cogito*. Only 18th century materialism (La Mettrie²¹) radically denied the psyche’s ontological dimension. The soul was nothing but an epiphenomenon, a kind of fictive ‘ghost’ dwelling in the only really (ontologically) existing thing: the body.

Despite his argumentation in favor of a “mental cause”, Lacan (like Freud) remains a complete materialist. For him too, the classical conception of ‘psyche’ has lost its value. The only thing that really – i.e. ontologically – exists, is matter. This however does not imply that psychical disease – hysteria, obsession, psychosis, paranoia – can be reduced to ‘matter’, i.e. to real, ontologically based causes. So what does the term ‘psychical’ mean if the psyche has lost any real ontological ground? What is the bearer of that psychical life, if it has no real status? Is what we call psyche or psychological, subject or subjectivity, not mere imagination? Is it not just fiction?

Psychoanalysis’ answer to these questions is simply yes, Lacan claims. The psychological has no other than an imaginary ground. The entirety of mental life is fictional. This, however, only means that imagination and fiction do indeed form the very basis of the psyche and the psychological. No doubt the subject is fictional; yet, nonetheless, this fiction should be considered as the subject’s ‘material’ ground. Psyche and subject, being imaginary and fictional, do exist and must be approached as autonomous phenomena, which cannot be reduced to other, more ‘objective’ realities. The subject we think we are has no real ground, it is merely fiction: but this image, this “*imago*” must be taken for the true object of ‘psychology’, of a ‘*logos* about the *psyche*’.

In “Propos sur la causalité psychique”, ex-neuro-psychiatrist Lacan (colleague and admirer of Henry Ey) writes:

²¹ Julien Offray de La Mettrie & Ann Thomson (ed.) (1996), *Machine Man and Other Writings*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nous croyons donc pouvoir désigner dans l'*imago* l'objet propre de la psychologie, exactement dans la même mesure où la notion galiléenne du point matériel inerte a fondé la physique. Nous ne pouvons encore pourtant en pleinement saisir la notion et tout cet exposé n'a pas eu d'autre but que de vous guider vers son évidence obscure. Elle me paraît corrélative d'un espace inétendu, c'est-à-dire indivisible, dont le progrès de la notion de *Gestalt* doit éclairer l'intuition, – et d'un temps fermé entre l'attente et la détente, d'un temps de phase et de répétition.²²

What the (paranoiac) patient thinks he is – his “*imago*” – is indeed an imaginary fiction. The real self of the infamous Papin Sisters, the ones who barbarically murdered their ‘mistress’ and her daughter, is to be found in their paranoiac self-image, as Lacan argues in one of his earliest texts.²³ This ‘*imago*’ is the bearer – the ‘subject’ – of their act and could not be reduced to something more physical. And as Lacan repeats again and again in his paper delivered in the presence of Henri Ey, this paranoiac self requires a scientific approach that does not reduce it to something else. Paranoia, the by definition paranoiac self, the autonomy of imagination: these things require a new science. They ask for a *modern* science.

Indeed, as Lacan suggests in the passage I quoted, science’s very modernity is implicated here. Its modern character is due to the fact that it dropped its essentialist – and, thus, ontological – presuppositions. Thus physics became modern when, contrary to the presumptions of Aristotelian-Thomistic physics, it no longer claimed to know the living essence of things. It redefined its object as inanimate, as “inert matter” (“*point matériel inerte*”), as mere ‘extension’, in conformity with Descartes’ notion of ‘*res extensa*’. This is the object of modern physics, introduced by Galileo, confirmed by Newton and philosophically well-founded by Kant. However, in the early modern world outlined by Descartes and the philosophy that followed, there still persisted, independent of physics, another reality: that of the ‘cogitans’, the ‘spirit’, the ‘mind’, the ‘subject’. Modern science has approached (and, to a large extent, still continues to approach) this subject – this psyche – as if it were a physical object. This was La Mettrie’s solution, which provided the paradigm for most modern neuro-psychiatry, as practiced for instance by Henri Ey. Psychoanalysis must take up this problem again and become a radically new modern science; one which,

²² Lacan 1966: 188. “Thus, we think we can designate the *imago* as the proper object of psychology, in exactly the same sense in which the Galilean notion of the inert material point founded [modern] physics. Yet we remain unable to fully understand this notion [of *imago*], and my entire account has had no other aim than to lead you toward the latter’s obscure obviousness. This notion seems to me to be correlative to a non-extended space – an indivisible space, of which the development of the notion of *Gestalt* must provide a clearer intuition – as well as to a time locked between awaiting [anticipation] and release [decision], a time of phase and repetition.” [my translation, MdK].

²³ J. Lacan (1933), “Motifs du Crime Paranoïaque – Le crime des sœurs Papin”, in : *Minotaure* 3+4; E. Roudinesco (1993), *Jacques Lacan – Esquisse d’une vie, histoire d’un système de pensée*, Paris : Fayard, p. 93-98.

while remaining materialistic, nonetheless refuses to reduce the specificity of subjectivity to the physical.

In the passage quoted above, Lacan refers to this new science as “psychology”: the ‘*logos*’ about the ‘*psyche*’, distinguished – even at the level of its very ‘*logos*’ – from the ‘*logos*’ about the ‘objective’, *res extensa*. For Lacan, this subject or ‘psyche’ is not a substantial *cogito* as Descartes taught; it is far more like the fictional ‘ghost in the machine’ mentioned by La Mettrie. But unlike La Mettrie, Lacan attributes a specific reality to this fiction – that of a non-real, fictional, or ‘virtual’ reality governed by a different kind of logic or ‘logos’.

In a way, it is the reality the society is made of; and so, the subject is not so much a ghost in the machine, as a ghost *in society*. Human identity, lacking any real ground, is the product of mere imagination. And the only ground – the only bearer or subject – of that imagination is the image, the “*imago*”. However, this is originally not so much the image of myself, as the one of the other. I imagine ‘myself’ – i.e. I construct the image I am – by watching the other. That is why my identity is profoundly sociological. For Lacan, ‘psychology’ is ‘sociology’²⁴: my psyche – that which I think I am, my identity, my subject – is the result of identification with the other, the ‘socius’, “*le semblable*”. Social identification with others precedes – and, in that sense, grounds – my identity.

In “Propos sur la causalité psychique”, Lacan defines identity as a *Gestalt*, referring to the then popular *Gestalt* psychology. This *Gestalt* is an “espace” (space) other than the one supposed in Cartesian ‘*res extensa*’; it is an “espace *inétendu*” – a non-extended space but also an in-divisible, ‘atomistic’ element. However, it is not a once and for all, unchangeable atom. Of course, this “*imago*” can change, but it can only change to become a new, indivisible *Gestalt*. It is the result of identification within a social field, an identification, which has its own ‘logic’, its own “spatio-temporal” functioning. The early Lacan elaborated this aspect of space in his famous ‘mirror stage’, using the tools of the *Gestalt* psychology. The temporal aspect was the object of another important early text: “Le temps logique”.²⁵ Thus “*la causalité psychique*”, the mental cause, refers to that *Gestalt* which is the result of a particular

²⁴ Sociology, understood in the original meaning of the term: not as defining a proper object in reality, but as a specific point of view on reality. This is sociology as seen by its ‘founding fathers’, or as deployed by Georges Bataille, ex-husband of Lacan’s wife, in his famous “Collège de sociologie”. Markos Zafiroopoulos has written a remarkable book about sociology’s (specifically Durkheim’s) decisive influence on the early Lacan: *Lacan et les sciences sociales*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (2001).

²⁵ David Blomme and Dominiek Hoens, “Anticipation and Subject: A Commentary on an Early Text by Lacan”, in D. Dubois (ed.), *Computing Anticipatory Systems: CASYS’99 – Third International Conference*, American Institute of Physics, 2000, pp. 117-123; Dominiek Hoens & Ed Pluth, “What if the Other is Stupid? On Badiou’s critique of Lacan’s ‘Logical Time’”, in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again*, London: Continuum, 2004.

identification within a social field, an identification that has its own spatio-temporal logic. The paragraph following the one I quoted above is clear about this:

Une forme de causalité [i.e. “the obscure obviousness” of psychology’s “proper object”, which is the “imago”] la fonde qui est la causalité psychique même : l’*identification*, laquelle est un phénomène irréductible, et l’*imago* est cette forme définissable dans le complexe spatio-temporel imaginaire qui a pour fonction de réaliser l’identification résolutive d’une phase psychique, autrement dit une métamorphose des relations de l’individu à son semblable.²⁶

Psychic reality is imaginary; it is a fiction; and its groundless scene is the social field. The psyche, the subject, is a fictive point, an image located within that field, in which one watches the other (to his “semblable”) in order to copy/create/imagine his identity – ‘his’ here refers at the same time to the supposed identity of the other, who comes first, and to ‘my’ identity, which comes in a logically subsequent time, and always anticipates the impossibility of knowing who I *really* am.²⁷

In the next stage of his thought, Lacan drastically redefines the scene within which the “imago” emerges. This scene remains the social field, but it is at the same time the specific scene Freud refers to as “*die andere Schauplatz*”, the scene of the unconscious representations (*Vorstellungen*).²⁸ Here again, the social field in which the libidinal being has to invent its identity (its subject), is a field of images, but now Lacan considers these images as what Freud calls ‘*Vorstellungen*’. The field of these representations forms an autonomous structure with a particular logic described in Freud’s *Traumdeutung* and (as Lacan has put it) remarkably similar to the linguistic structures described in Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous *Cours de linguistique générale*. This representational (fictional) field, in which the libidinal being has to invent its identity, is, more precisely, the cultural field as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss: a field organized by the materiality of the signifier and governed by a linguistic logic.²⁹

Here, the status of the ‘psyche’ – the “proper object of psychology”, i.e. of the science of the subject – considerably changes. The fictional ‘psyche’ or ‘subject’ is no longer an

²⁶ Lacan 1966: 188.

²⁷ This is the thesis of “Le temps logique”: the syllogism Lacan is referring to in this text, illustrates how time is inherent to identification: identification is always ‘too fast’: it is only possible when someone anticipates an identity which, in the moment he takes the decision, can only be presumed by presuming how others ‘lie’ about their identity.

²⁸ Freud, 1972; Lacan 1966: 548, 685, 689, 799.

²⁹ Markos Zafiroopoulos (2003), *Lacan et Lévi-Strauss, ou le retour à Freud 1951-1957*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

image. Now, it is even repressed by this very image. In the final analysis, my identity, the ‘self’ I think I am, is not so much the image of the other, but something that remains forever hidden behind this image. Neither does the world I live in consist of images, i.e. of “*indivisible*” atoms of fiction. My world consists of *Vorstellungen*: linguistically operating representations. I live in – and from – signifiers. However, the ground of my identity – my subject – is itself not a representation or a signifier. Signifiers only represent it. Consequently, it is absent in the world (which is a world of signifiers). The subject is that “which a signifier represents for another signifier”, as Lacan puts it in one of his formula.³⁰ It has no proper existence; it exists only through representation, through the signifier, whose existence is not real but fictional.

In short, here again, there is no such a thing as a real, ontological psyche or subject. Nevertheless, neither the subject nor the psyche can be reduced to something else, something more physical. They are entirely fictional and build up with fiction’s materiality. Only, the subject as such is not a signifier among signifiers, it is the insistent absentee every signifier refers to, an ‘absentee’ who only exist through the never ending game of reference. The subject is the bearer of a fictional world in which, as such, it remains absent.

It is clear now that psychoanalysis, as science of the subject (‘logos’ about the *fictional* ‘psyche’), cannot be ontology in the strong, metaphysical sense of the word. It cannot pretend to any knowledge of something that *really* is; something ontological. It is a science of fiction and it is itself thoroughly characterized by fiction. Certainly, it ascertains the truth, but it is a truth that recognizes the primordial lie – the ‘*proton pseudos*’ – as its horizon. It is this very horizon of primordial lying that separates Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory from any kind of ontology. It is not an ontology of the human; it is not even an ontology of the ‘inhuman’ (for instance in Lyotard’s sense of the word): it is not an ontology at all.

4. Re-ontologizing the non-ontology of the human

However, this is only one side of the Lacanian story. For despite the strict distinction between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real (i.e. despite the definition of the ontological as real and *thus* ‘impossible’), the ontological nevertheless continues to persist in Lacanian thought. At least as a problem or a question. For even if the real (the ontological) is only the object and

³⁰ Lacan 1966: 819, 835, 840. Lacan uses this formula for the first time in his seminar on transference: J. Lacan (1991), *Le séminaire, Livre VIII, Le transfert: 1960-1961*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris, Seuil, p. 286, 307.

never the subject of desire³¹, even if desire is thoroughly fictional, it still remains the case that this desire and this fiction *are*. Even if fiction is not real, it *is*. Even if desire is at a profound level a desire *for* being and is therefore never the being it desires, it nonetheless *is*. So, what kind of status has this ‘is’ – this ‘being’ – of desire and fiction?

In a way, it is here that we encounter the same question as the one underlying Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. It is the question what it means that the one questioning what is, is himself (a) being. What is the ontological status of a being that questions being? This issue forced Heidegger to rethink human being as well as human discourse on being, i.e. ontology. The human is not simply a being among the other beings; it is a place – a ‘topos’, a ‘*Da*’ or ‘there’ – where being *is* as being *questioned*. This is why the mere facticity of ‘*Dasein*’ ‘deconstructs’ metaphysical ontology, so Heidegger argues. It turns it into a radically new kind of ontology, ‘destroying’ almost the entire framework of traditional thought, for instance the distinction between subject and object so firmly established since the emergence of modernity (i.e. since Descartes).

Lacan’s treatment of the ontological question underlying Heidegger’s (and others’) thought does not give rise to a new ontology. In a way, unlike Heidegger’s philosophy, Lacanian theory remains within the limits of Cartesian modernism, holding on to the strict distinction between subject and object. It holds on to the notion of subject, albeit one that is no longer defined as an ontological ‘substance’, but as a lack of ontological being, as “un manque à être”. It is a fictional subject of *desire* (for being, or for whatever). Similarly, Lacanian theory holds on to the notion of object, which defines the status of being: ‘being’ defined as the inaccessible object of desire. However, through this very object, the ontological will come to penetrate more and more into Lacanian theory, and regain a place in its very core.³²

³¹ Here, ‘desire’ (*désir*) is used in the Lacanian sense of the word, i.e. a specific structure supporting the ‘normal’ libidinal economy and used in opposition to ‘Demande’ (*Demande*). The first support of the human libidinal economy is what Lacan calls the ‘Demand’: the child’s ‘Demand’ to the other supposes that the other is without lack (i.e. that he has the answer to any demand the child asks). After having faced the impasses of that Demand-structure, the libidinal being constitutes itself referring to the other as marked by an inevitable lack. It identifies with another who is not without a lack, i.e. who ‘desires’. This way, the child will constitute itself (its identity) as ‘desire’. Lacan develops his ‘theory of desire’ in his fifth and sixth seminar: J. Lacan (1998), *Le séminaire, Livre V, Les formations de l’inconscient: 1957-1958*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris, Seuil ; (1996), *Le séminaire, Livre VI, Le désir et son interprétation: 1958-1959*, Paris, Publication hors commerce de l’Association Freudienne Internationale.

³² In a way, Lacan’s theory during the fifties is ontological in the Heideggerian sense: man has to find ‘himself’ – the ground of his identity, his ‘subject’ – in his very question. There he will find his being. However, this question – and thus this being – has no real or ontological but only a symbolic ground. In the sixties, Lacanian theory allows a real ontological dimension, but this is not to be found in the subject site [site or side?], but only in the object site of man’s libidinal economy. For a more extended explanation of this turn in Lacan’s theory, see François Balmès (1999), *Ce que Lacan dit de l’être*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 168-169.

For the importance of desire's object within libidinal economy increases as Lacan's theory develops. Being impossible (because) real, it is nonetheless given more and more weight. Before his seminar on ethics in 1959/60, the object of desire was conceived as a signifier or, more exactly, as the void supporting the signifier's functioning.³³ In his ethics seminar, for the first time in his *oeuvre*, Lacan conceived of the ultimate object of desire not only as the void of the signifier, but as the real *beyond* the signifier. The ground – the support – of the libidinal economy is to be located not only in the (fictional) subject; when this subject fades away, which happens in fantasmatic enjoyment (*'jouissance'*), that economy is supported by an imaginary scenario of signifiers conceptualized by Lacan as 'phantasm'. A phantasm is the imaginarily 'frozen' tableau depicting the subject's fading underneath the signifier. This scenario is structured around the object of desire, an object in which the subject wants to disappear – which is Lacan's conception of fulfilled desire or enjoyment (*'jouissance'*).³⁴ This object is real, as Lacan emphasizes from 1960 onwards, and phantasm functions as an ultimate protection against it, although at the same time, the entire libidinal structure is oriented towards it. The whole fictional structure of the libidinal apparatus is built around an unattainable object whose status is real – or 'ontological', in the classical, metaphysical sense of the word. The center of the desire-machine is a void, but a void anchored in an ontological point, which, being ontological and thus inaccessible, is nevertheless the ultimate point of reference, and even the ultimate basis for the entire libidinal apparatus.

Yet this ontological basis does not give back to desire its solid foundation. On the contrary, this ontological dimension renders the economy of desire all the more complex and unstable. Even as conceived within the limits of the imaginary and the symbolic, the logic of desire was already characterized as extremely cunning, as full of tricks and ruses. The re-introduction of the real into libidinal economy as its ontological weight renders the latter even more cunning, even trickier. For besides the slippery logic of the signifier, libidinal economy now has to deal with an object that, although it occupies the center of the whole system, operates as a resistance, an obstacle towards which all libidinal energy is oriented, but one against which the entire libidinal system must be protected at the same time.

³³ In his seventh seminar (on the "ethics of psychoanalysis"), Lacan conceptualised the ultimate object of desire (which is of course the object of enjoyment), as *Das Ding*, which has a real status.

³⁴ In his seventh seminar, Lacan introduces 'enjoyment' – *'jouissance'* – as a proper concept: J. Lacan (1986), *Le Séminaire, Le séminaire, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse: 1959-1960*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris, Seuil, p. 225-241; (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, Translated with notes by Dennis Porter, London & New York, Routledge / W.W. Norton & Company, p. 191-204.

This is why Lacan's re-affirmation of the ontological coincides with a reaffirmation of the death-drive. Being oriented towards the real, libidinal economy is oriented towards its own destruction; yet, at the same time, the very drive of this orientation is to be considered as a defense mechanism against the real – against the tendency to self-destruction. So, to refer to Freud's famous sentence in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, what seem to be “the guardians of life, are in principle the henchmen of death”.³⁵ Life, in principle driven by pleasure, secretly leads to death. However contradictory this might be, it provides a pointed formulation of the basic insight of the Freudian pleasure principle, which defines life as lived by perverting natural/biological life. This is why Lacan's ‘ontologization’ of the drive – the reformulation of his theory of the drive in which the real characteristics of the object of desire are emphasized – is to be interpreted, not as a break with his merely symbolic theory of the drive, but as a sharpening of it. It tightens up psychoanalysis, turning it into a non-ontology of the human.

³⁵ “... auch diese Lebenswächter sind ursprünglich Trabanten des Todes gewesen”, in: S. Freud (1975), *Studienausgabe, Band III: Psychologie des Unbewussten*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, p. 249.