

‘THOU SHALL NOT DENY THE PLACE OF A GOD’

A Lacanian approach of post-modern cynicism

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Être rien, pour être à sa vrai place dans le tout.

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In antiquity, cynicism was broadly appreciated for its highly critical potentiality. Of course, Plato considered Diogenes of Sinope, the well-known cynic philosophers, as “*Socrates mainoumenos*”: “Socrates become mad”.² But even when, in his eyes, cynicism was madness, did he not tell us, too, that philosophy (including science) is impossible without its little mad ‘demon’ – a demon very similar to the one operating in Diogenes and vouching for thought’s indispensable criticism? Which did not keep him from warning we should allow only a homeopathic dose of this crazy demon! However indispensable he might be, unbound and unrestricted, he is philosophy’s and science’s most dangerous enemy.

The same way, in early modernity, Pierre Bayle (not unlike so many medieval and renaissance thinkers have done before him³) praised Diogenes’ cynic tradition because of its critical potentiality.⁴ Free thought – which is, as he suggests, a pleonasm – is based upon the kind of demonic kernel the cynics rightly put in the centre of both their philosophy and their behaviour (what, for them, amounts to the same thing). Only, so Bayle too adds, Diogenes is not exactly reason’s *norm*, for he represents at the same time its dark and truly mad side. Also for Bayle, cynicism, although indispensable, is only possible and desirable to a certain homeopathic extent.

It is precisely this homeopathic dimension that contemporary late- or postmodern cynicism seems having lost. It is as if it has dropped its limits and has become everyone’s

¹ Simone Weil (1999), *Œuvres*, Édition établie sous la direction de Florence de Lussy, Paris : Quarto Gallimard, p. 857.

² At least, this is what Diogenes Laertius let Plato say “On one occasion, he [Plato] was asked by a certain person, “What sort of a man Diogenes, do you think is Socrates?” and he said, “A madman.”” (Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, VI 54). For the notion of ‘Socrates mainomenos’, see the second chapter in Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting (1979), *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, p. 55-225. See also: Léonce Paquet (éd.) (1992), *Les Cyniques grecs: Fragments et témoignages*, Paris: Le livre de poche, p. 7.

³ S. Matton, “Cynicism and Christianity from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance”, in: R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (1996), *The Cynics. The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, p. 240-264.

⁴ Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, “The modern reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment”, in Branham and Goulet-Cazé 1996: 329-365, especially: 332-333.

daily attitude. We now all realise very well that the existing world is highly criticizable and that it is far from being the realm of justice we dreamed of, but we too often use this criticism only to justify we do nothing against it. Whereas classical ideology is defined as a kind of “basic, constitutive naïvité” (‘we do not know it, but we do it’), the ideology of cynicism sounds more like: ‘we know very well what we are doing, but we are doing it’.⁵ In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk defined modern cynicism as “Enlightenment’s false consciousness”: it is Enlightenment blinded as it were by its own light.⁶ Nowadays, we *all* have become Diogenes, i.e. ‘Socrates become made’. And if we, therefore, have lost our criticism, we didn’t lose cynicism’s madness. Yet, the only remedy against this madness is to be found in cynicism’s very source, i.e. in what Sloterdijk calls with a word more near to the Greek original: ‘kynicism’ – kynicism being the genuine critical core of thought and consciousness. The paradox, however, remains: critical thought is impossible without a kind of madness, i.e. of ‘kynicism’, but precisely this kind of ‘kynicism’ easily turns in its opposite, in cynicism, and threatens to ruin all critical potentiality.

This paradox pointedly tells the shape late (or post-) modern consciousness is in. We all have become more or less cynical, and although we know the danger of this cynicism, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to get rid of it. For both (bad) cynicism and its remedy, ‘kynicism’, draw to the same origin. The evil we face is to be fought with the evil’s very source.

In this chapter, I first explain this paradox as a typically *modern* symptom and, therefore, connect link cynicism up to the very kernel of modernity (1-2). Then, in order to clarify this symptom, I will introduce a Lacanian approach (3-5). This will, finally, allow me to show the theological background of this problem and its implication for a theory of religion as ‘culture of desire’ (6-8).

1. ‘Cynic’ Origins of Modernity

In a way, modernity is the result of the kind of scepticism dominating late Renaissance thought. One can refer to Michel de Montaigne or to the less known Francisco Sanchez, the author of *Quod nihil scitur* (*That Nothing is Known*), a work that might have inspired René

⁵ I refer to the chapter “Cynicism as Form of Ideology” in: Slavoj Žižek (1989), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London / New York: Verso, p. 28-30.

⁶ Peter Sloterdijk (1983), *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, p. 37.

Descartes with whom modernity makes its real start.⁷ Not unlike Descartes, he was looking for a new (i.e. other than Aristotelian) base for science and knowledge, and, therefore criticized the possibility of science and knowledge as such. This conclusion that this base simply does not exist is quite close to the radical negativity of Diogenes, for whom the aim of philosophy (and thought in general) is rather to destroy than to construct stable knowledge.

This skeptical – and even cynical – position is the methodical starting point of the one whom we owe the modern paradigm, René Descartes. Of course, *scepsis* and doubt are as old as philosophy, and it was proper to antique as well as to medieval thought. But it was always accompanied by the warning not to go too far with it in order not to fall, precisely, into the ‘madness’ of cynicism. Descartes, however, changes that kind of classical attitude towards doubt and *scepsis*. For him, doubting should keep going on as long possible. It is thought’s first duty, and one should do it as radically as ‘methodically’. Only a ‘methodical’ doubt can give science a new ground. And, once established, science should keep doubt as its basic method. For doubt itself delivers – and even *is* – science’s ground, its support, its ‘*hupokeimenon*’ or ‘*subjectum*’.⁸

The argument Descartes develops in his *Discours de la méthode* is well known.⁹ I can doubt about anything (‘Is what I see not a dream?’ ‘Is my entire existence not a chimera?’ et cetera), but I cannot doubt that this doubt takes place, that it ‘is’, and, thus, must have a support, a ‘ground’. Neither can I doubt that this ground has something to do with me: that this doubt is, in me, the first thing of which I am sure it is *really* me. Doubting even about myself, I find myself immediately being the substantial bearer – the ‘subject’ – of my doubting. And since my doubt – now used methodically – has gone as far as possible, its outcome can only be absolutely sure. Here, Descartes faces the indubitable certainty that gives science and knowledge the new ground they were seeking for.

Scepticism’s and cynicism’s hyperbolic doubt, being overcome by a new scientific certainty, nevertheless remains science’s very method. With every step in its enquiry, modern

⁷ Francisco Sanchez (1988), *That Nothing is known (Quod nihil scitur); Introduction, notes, bibliography* by Elaine Limbrick, Latin text established, annotated and translated by Douglas F.S. Thomson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For the relation to Descartes, see the introduction p. 82-85.

⁸ ‘*Subjectum*’ is the Latin translation of the Aristotelean Greek term ‘*hupokeimenon*’. See for instance: Jean-Luc Nancy (1992), “Un sujet?”, in: A. Michels, J.-L. Nancy, M. Safouan, J.-P. Vernant, *Homme et sujet. La subjectivité en question dans les sciences humaines*, Paris: Harmattan, p. 47-114; Lambros Couloubaritsis, “La question du ‘sujet’ dans la philosophie grecque”, in: *Cahiers de l’École des Sciences Philosophiques et Religieuses*, 8 (1990): 9-41; Cornelius Castoriadis, “The State of the Subject Today”, in: C. Castoriadis, *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis and Imagination*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 137-171.

⁹ René Descartes (1996), *Discourse on the method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Translation by D. Weissman, with essay of W.T. Bluhm e.a., New Haven: Yale University Press.

science has to keep on doubting as long as possible. Its scientific attitude coincides with a methodically sustained suspicion or mistrust. Its basic presumption tells that everything in the world could be deceptive, as everyone could play false including myself. That is why Sloterdijk can give an alternative definition of the Cartesian *cogito*: “I am deceived, therefore I am. And: I unmask deceptions; I myself deceive; therefore I preserve myself. The Cartesian *cogito, ergo sum* can be translated this way.¹⁰ Only such a ‘cynical’ subject guarantees science’s certainty. It is, and must be, again and again, re-established by an unremitting doubt.

2. Cynicism Persisting in Modernity

However, did modernity not drop the Cartesian subject? Did it not, more exactly, reduce the subject to an object, considering the objective material world – the ‘*res extensa*’ – to be the unique substantial world and, therefore, the unique world science can rely on?

This was indeed the only way to get rid of the highly problematic dualism which followed directly from Descartes’ theory. The ‘thing’ doubting about the world (i.e. the thinking ‘thing’, i.e. the *cogito*) was radically different from the things doubted and thought about. The former was a world of freedom, the latter a mechanical world determined by fixed laws. The subject – the free world of thought and will – had nothing to do with the unfree material world that thought and science are thinking about. To guarantee a link between the two worlds, to guarantee that my independent thoughts said something about the outside things they think about, Descartes could only refer to the old medieval God. It is finally His Almighty Goodness that can arrange it the way that those two radically different worlds can go together.

When 18th century philosophers wanted to get rid of God, it was first of all to get rid of the untenable dualism Cartesianism had introduced in modern thought. So, La Mettrie, in his *L’homme machine* (1748), declared one of the two worlds for non-substantial, namely the one of the soul.¹¹ The only substantial thing – the only thing able to be considered as reality’s ‘subject’ or ‘bearer’ – is matter. The soul only exists as an epi-phenomenon of the body. All quality we usually ascribe to the soul, will once be ascribed to the body. Only now, a science about human subjectivity is possible, since it is entirely to be found in the body. Henceforth,

¹⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Translated by M. Eldred, London & New York: Verso, p. 331.

¹¹ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, Ann Thomson (Ed.) (1996), *Machine man and other writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the human subject has become a scientific object and it is the body's objectivity that is its 'bearer', its 'ground', its 'subject'.

What, then, is the subject/bearer of this scientific knowledge – not of this knowledge's *object*, but of the knowledge *itself*? La Mettrie's materialism (as well as our 21st scientific approach) can but deny this question. According to him, the 'subject' (*hypokeimenon*, bearer) of knowledge is to be found in its object. Yet, one can only *suppose* so. That we will be scientifically sure about the fact that that knowledge is an entirely material procedure (and that, thus, it is its own 'subject'), is something we *will* proof *in the future*. La Mettrie's argument entirely leans upon this future tense, just like contemporary arguments nowadays still do: it *will be* proven.¹² This is to say it is *supposed* to be so. So, the 'subject' of science is a *supposition* - a supposition, also in the literal sense of the word: a hypothesis literally 'put underneath' science – for this is the literally meaning of the English/French 'supposition', the Latin '*subjectum*' and the Greek '*hypokeimenon*'. So, the ground – the support, layer, or bearer – of scientific knowledge is what is hypothetically 'put underneath' it, what literally is 'supposed'. Modern science finds its subject in a supposition – supposition, also in the current sense of the word, namely the sense of fiction, of imagination.

Here, the cynical condition of the modern subject faces its origin. Seeking for an absolutely (i.e. scientifically) certain 'subject', modern man can solely *suppose* it. Also when, as did La Mettrie, he supposes this 'subject' to be situated in the object of his knowledge, he denies that this is in fact a supposition. He denies that he still (and *only*) supposes *himself* to be the underlying ground of whatever he claims about reality. Yet, this denied (Cartesian) subject still remains the subject of thought and of doubt; but it is precisely *only* in doubt that he can realize what it means to be the free subject of a free world. At the one hand, modern man considers matter (body) to be the real 'subject' of knowledge: knowledge is supposed to be based upon objectivity, i.e. upon *real* being. At the other hand, however, he never stops doubting and remains the 'cynic', distrusting all traditional truths and, even, truth as such. For only 'cynical' doubting gives modern science-based man the freedom he ascribes to himself. Only cynical doubt gives him the freedom his science (although based in free thought) cannot but deny.

¹² Today, it is neuroscience who legitimizes itself with this 'future argument'. To quote one example: "We are at the beginning of the neuroscientific revolution. At its end we *shall* know how the mind works, what governs our nature, and how we know the world. Indeed, what is now going on in neuroscience may be looked at as a *prelude* to the largest possible scientific revolution, one with inevitable and important social consequences." (Gerald Edelman [1992], *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*, London: Penguin, p. xiii).

In this perspective, the cynical subject leaving all truth behind is far from being incompatible with the subject relying on scientific truth. In fact, they *both* characterize *simultaneously* our *modern* condition. For, as Descartes showed, modern ‘faith’ in scientific truth is based upon a procedure excluding – i.e. doubting – any truth. This doubt necessarily supposes a point outside its object of doubt. This is the so-called ‘objective’ point of view, the *conditio sine qua non* for modern science, which is in fact itself excluded from the object.¹³ This is why one can say that, contrary to what is commonly thought, modern science has not overcome the Cartesian subject. It only has been emptied and deprived from any substantiality. It has been reduced to a purely formal point outside the ‘object’. This is the way it gives a support – a subject – to science’s ‘objective’ view – a ‘subject’, which however can only exist by its denial.¹⁴

Yet, is ‘cynical’ doubt not the precise way for the subject to overcome its denial? Only by questioning all established truths, it becomes conscious of the place where, unconsciously, science has put it. In cynical scepticism, the subject can ‘openly’ affirm itself as the question mark put after every truth-claim. There, the (post-)modern subject can perform him- or herself as the free ‘supposition’ – i.e. the free subject – of a world that, for that reason, can itself be defined as free. So, post-modern relativism and modern scientific certainty are not so contradictory as one might think. In fact, as we see every day before our eyes, they go perfectly hand in hand.

3. Lacan’s Freudian Response to Descartes

If Lacan, having no specific theory on cynicism, nevertheless can help us analyzing its problematic persisting in current society, it is not because of some psychological – or even psychoanalytical – explanation. According to Lacan, Freudian theory is not so much a kind of ‘analysis of the psyche’ or a ‘psychology’, as a critical reflection of their very possibility – i.e. of the possibility of social sciences as well as modern science of the human as such. It is, more precisely, a critique upon the denial of the subject in (and by) these sciences. In this sense, the analysis performed in the lines above is very indebted to Lacanian theory.

¹³ To observe ‘objectively’ a group of persons, the scientist has to take position behind a screen where he can look at them without be seen: he necessarily must take a position *outside* the object he observes.

¹⁴ So, objective science is only possible thanks to an eclipse of its ‘subject’. This is why modern science lacks by definition any tool to examine its ‘subject’. And this what Heidegger expressed in his famous saying that “science does not think”.

Descartes shuffled the cards in a new way. He divided the world into object and subject, or, more exactly, into the object and the subject of science – scientific research being only possible about the object.¹⁵ Paradigmatic for this new science was Newton, who established a new ‘philosophy of nature’, or (what at that time was still synonym) a new “physics”, concerning indeed only the ‘object’ side of the world, the *res extensa*. After him, the “Newtons of the mind” (to use an expression of Peter Gay¹⁶) tried to extend this new objective physics to the domain of the subject by treating it as an object, as a material affair. Lacan, defining himself not exactly as a “Newton of the mind”, nevertheless refers to Newton in order to stress that the new science he proposed for the objective world, still hasn’t a pendant for the subjective one. This subjective world needs still a similar scientific revolution – a revolution ending up, not in an ‘objective science’ of the subject (as current psychology, social sciences and even philosophy of mind pretend to be), but in a new “science of subjectivity”, a science listening to a *different logic* than the one of existing sciences.¹⁷ This “science of subjectivity” does not concern the soul, for, according to Lacan too, the soul is as fictitious as La Mettrie said. But, unlike La Mettrie, a science of this fiction is nonetheless possible and necessary. Subjective activities such as thought and will are to be linked to the ‘subject’ as the *fictitious support of a fictitious identity*.¹⁸

Indeed, Lacan endorses the post-Cartesian criticism concerning the subject, saying that there is not such a thing as a substantial self-conscious *cogito*. He even endorses the idea that the Cartesian subject is nothing but a fictitious supposition. This, however does not imply that the subject is simply nothing, and, consequently, reducible to other – real and ‘objective’ – things. Surely, the subject is a fiction; but, even as fiction, it exists and must be considered as reality.

This is Freud’s most basic insight, so Lacan repeats again and again, and this is why he is responsible for a scientific revolution similar to the one provoked by Newton: unlike

¹⁵ According to Descartes, the subject (*cogito*) did not need scientific research because it was always already conscious of itself, since doubting about everything (including its own existence) was immediately revealed as being the very base of its certainty.

¹⁶ Peter Gay (1969), *The Enlightenment, 2nd volume: The Science of Freedom*, New York / London: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 174-185.

¹⁷ The expression “the science of the subject” is already in the early Lacan; see Lacan 1966: 285.

¹⁸ This implies a critique on one of the main issues of Richard Webster’s book *Why Freud was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis* (1996, London: Harper Collins). Webster claims that (Lacanian and other) psychoanalysis – and even structuralism in general – are in fact the result of the Christian dualism of body and soul. By dropping the modern Cartesian retake of that dualism, he drops at the same time the main problem of modernity and its science, which is precisely the invention of the modern subject. Therefore, it should be stressed that Lacanian theory is *not a scientific theory of the mind*, as Webster and so many claim, but a *theory of the subject* – ‘subject’ in the understood as the main *problem* in modern thought. Psychoanalysis is a theory *questioning* the supposed subject of science (including a science of the mind).

physics and other ‘objective’ sciences, Freudian theory affirms the reality of fiction. Human subjective life is highly fictitious and imaginary; yet, those fictions exist, and demand another kind of logic than a ‘physical’ one. Not the logic of freedom Descartes supposed, nor the determinist logic of modern physics and related sciences, but a new kind of logic that, in comparison with the normal scientific one, looks distorted, wrenched, ‘perverted’. It is a logic where hate and love go (always more or less *inharmoniously*) hand in hand, where cause is neither determining nor free, where death ends up to be life’s principle, and where negation does not count – it is, in short, a psychoanalytical logic.¹⁹ This kind of logic is able to analyze the typically modern denegation of the subject: being denied, being treated as a fiction and, therefore, as non-existing, this fictional subject is nevertheless in play. And when this subject, cynically or not, treats the world as a set of uncertain fictions, it is itself the non less fictitious subject (bearer, ground) of those fictions.

At least, this is what claims Lacan interpreting Freud. We are the subjects of a doubtful world, a world apparently built up with lies and fictions, and truth can only be discovered proceeding from this deceptive situation. This, too, was the Cartesian starting point. But Descartes immediately turned doubt into certainty or ‘dreamy’ fictions into reality. Facing the dreams and fantasies of his patients and listening at their ‘free associations’, Freud on the contrary was forced to dwell a bit longer with the fictions playing there. To understand the hidden wishes that forced people to appeal for mental health care, he realized he had to start, not from a supposed point of certainty (a supposed subject), but from those very fictions. Of course, those wishes, fantasies, symptoms and problems were for the most part imaginary and fictitious, but they nevertheless made the patient suffer, and Freud has no other ‘material’ than those fictions to work with in order to cure them. What is more, observing the patients locked up in their fictitious webs, he realized that only there, they could find what they were after, i.e. their ‘real’ self. Not unlike Descartes, they were all looking, in themselves, for a solid ground or ‘subject’. Yet, Freud discovered that this subject did not so much predate these fictions, as it was itself in a way caused by them. The subject was not a self-given and

¹⁹ According to Freud, our libidinal relation to the world (as well as to ourselves) is neither simply free nor determined. The same traumatic situation necessitates one person to choose a traumatic solution while another might choose a non-traumatic one. This, however, is not to say that reactions upon traumatic situation are free. At least, they are not the reactions of a free *will*. These reactions are libidinal, and the libidinal logic can only set out some coordinates, but it can not exclude a certain factor of chance and luck. In the same sense, our relation to the world and to ourselves is never simple but always (structurally) complex. This is what Freud means by the ‘oedipus complex’ way: it is a concept to say that our relation to the world (including ourselves) is structurally characterized by both love and hate at the same time. Another ‘law’ Freud discovered in the unconscious is the fact that ‘negation’ does not count there. When the patient tells his dream was certainly not about (for instance) his mother, Freud observed that his unconscious wish was indeed about his mother (this is what Freud called ‘die Verneinung’, the denial).

self-conscious entity of primary order, as Descartes thought, but a construction, made ‘unconsciously’ by fictions operating in an autonomous way. Only when giving free play to the autonomously operating fictions (during a free association for instance), the patient came closer to who he ‘really’ was and to what was truly going on with him. Only then, he realized that “we are such stuff as dreams are made on”, like Shakespeare let Prospero say in *The Tempest* (IV, 1). The strange autonomy of fictions: this is what Freud discovered and what forced him to build up a new kind of logic tracing out how fictions and dreams are able to be the stuff human subjects live by.

4. Subject of Fictions

The ‘science of the object’ – Newtonian physics – has been legitimised by Kant who limited its knowledge to phenomena declaring the things themselves (*Das Ding an sich*) as unknowable. Since Freud, we know we still need a ‘science of the subject’. Lacan realizes that this is impossible without acknowledging fiction’s proper reality. And it is Lacan, too, who during his entire oeuvre, tried to epistemologically legitimize this science, by showing (for instance) that the subject is not to be known as a ‘real’ thing.

The paranoid patient, so already the young Lacan claimed, is fighting with himself as with an ‘image’, an imaginary fiction.²⁰ This is the way he interpreted one of the notorious crime-scenes of those days: the drama of the Papin Sisters. One night, these two modest and obedient servants murdered cruelly both their ‘mistress’ and her daughter to whom they had always been extremely attached. The key to the drama is to be found in their paranoid self-image, which was entirely the result of identification with their ‘mistress’, so Lacan argues in one of his early texts.²¹ They could no longer tolerate the distance separating them from ‘themselves’, i.e. their mistress, and therefore had to kill her. To Lacan, it is clear that the bearer – the ‘subject’ – of their act is an ‘image’, and that this kind of imaginary subject can not be reduced to something more physical. This image is not the result of brain functioning; it has been built up in imaginary identification with others.

In that sense, the self (the subject) is not even the imaginary ‘ghost in the machine’ La Mettrie and others talked about. It is rather a ghost *in the society*. In a way, Lacan considered

²⁰ This is the kernel of the doctoral thesis he wrote in the early thirties. See: J. Lacan (1975), *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil (first edition in 1932, Paris: La François).

²¹ 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.

‘psychology’ to be basically ‘sociology’²²: one’s ‘psyche’ – that what he thinks he is, the ‘ground’ of his identity, his subject – is the result of identification with the other, the ‘socius’, ‘*le semblable*’. Social identification with others precedes – and, in that sense, grounds – one’s identity. This is why human identity is profoundly social. The *other* – the social field, or what Lacan soon called: the *Other* – has primacy over the self.

The subject is a fictitious point, an image located within a social field where one looks at the other in order to copy/create/imagine an identity for himself. The early Lacan defined this psychic reality as *Gestalt*, referring to the at that time popular psychology of the same name. This was the main point of reference in his theory of the ‘mirror stage’. There, the social field from which an identity is extracted was considered to be an imaginary scene.²³ In the early fifties, this scene was drastically redefined when Lacan, referring to Lévi-Strauss, conceived it as organized, not by images, but by signifiers responding to a linguistic logic.²⁴

Here, the fictional identity is no longer an image, but a story, a representation made of signifiers. On the most basic level, one’s identity is the result of identification with what others tell about him. We have become who we are only *after* identification with signifiers others used while talking about us. Indeed, we are not born with an identity (or as a subject). Each of us is born as a libidinal being, seeking basically for pleasure, so Lacan repeats Freud. And because pleasure cannot immediately be gained from reality (which is a real trauma for the child), the ‘infans’ has to rely on others. Yet, since those others cannot give the immediate pleasure either, but, instead, talk to – and about – him, the child has only their talking to counter his traumatic situation. This is to say that the child only exists as being ‘someone’ (as an identity) in so far others talk about him, i.e. in so far as he literally is the ‘subject’ about whom they talk.

So, to become someone (to become an identity), the child has to realize himself as the ‘subject’ the others talk about – ‘subject’, used here both in the grammatical and in the formal, logical sense of the word: the child will have to build up a self as being the subject (the *hypokeymenon*, the *subjectum*, the bearer) of the signifiers used by others. The ‘infans’,

²² Sociology, understood in the original meaning of the term: not defining a proper object in reality, but a specific point of view to reality. Sociology as the ‘founding fathers’ saw it, or as the ex-husband of Lacan’s wife, Georges Bataille, had set it up in his famous “Collège de sociologie”. Markos Zafiroopoulos wrote a remarkable book on the decisive influence of sociology (Durkheim) on the early Lacan: (2001), *Lacan et les sciences sociales*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

²³ See his essay “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu’elle nous est révélée dans l’expérience psychanalytique”, in Lacan 1966 : 93-100. See also : John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (1982), *A Reader’s Guide to Écrits*, New York : International Universities Press, p. 26-41.

²⁴ Markos Zafiroopoulos (2003), *Lacan et Lévi-Strauss, ou le retour à Freud 1951-1957*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

still lacking any identity or subject, identifies with whom the signifiers of the others (parents, adults, friends) refer to. He identifies with the one these signifiers claim to represent.

Here, one should stress the crucial point in the Lacanian theory of the subject. For, all this means that the ground of one's identity – i.e. the subject – is strictly not even representation or signifier. Signifiers *only represent it*. As such, the subject is *absent* in the world (of signifiers). The subject is that “what a signifier represents to other signifiers”, as one of Lacan's formula's puts it.²⁵ The subject does not exist on its own, as Descartes thought; it exists thanks to signifiers and *only* thanks to them. But it exists not *as* signifier. It only exists as what lacks in the chain of signifiers (although) referring to it. In its quality of what lacks in the signifier, it makes that chain endlessly going on, each signifier referring again and again to another signifier. Only in this quality, the subject sustains the signifying chain and assures an identity to the libidinal human being.

So, the subject is indeed what it literally means: a supposition. And being a *modern* subject, it is a *fictional* supposition: it is what the signifiers *suppose* to represent, what they ‘put underneath’, suggesting that, there, a real one supports the whole story. Yet, in fact, representing the subject, they represent only the signifier's lack, whereas nonetheless, these signifiers can never stop doing *as if* there is someone who is really ‘laying underneath’ them (which is the literal meaning of ‘supposition’ and ‘subjectum’). And this is what, on the level of consciousness, the concrete subjects – the men or the women – believe. At that level, they remain Cartesian modernists, and believe that, *first*, they are what they are, and, *only secondly*, they are identical with the story others (and they themselves) tell about them – in other words they believe they precede their story and their identity.

5. Postmodern Cynicism: ...

Unless they are post-modern! Unless they have a clear understanding of how basically uncertain the human condition is, and how relative so-called certainty is. What, if they consciously know that nothing is simply what it looks like, and no-one is the ‘real’ subject he thinks he is? What, if they are sure that all ‘true stories are dead’ and nothing is real, not even their own identity? This is the moment they might fall in the trap of cynicism. And the entire question, then, is how to distinguish cynic from non-cynic (post)modern self-affirmation?

²⁵ Lacan 1966: 819, 835, 840. Lacan uses this formula for the first time in his seminar on identification: J. Lacan (1999), *L'identification. Séminaire 1961-1962*, Paris: Publication hors commerce par l'Association freudienne internationale, p. 60.

The one who claims that nothing is sure, that all is relative or even fictitious does no longer take the position of a classical, self-assured subject, so post-modernism tells; it is rather the non-position of a nomadic movement lacking any fixed home-place and even identity.²⁶ However, what is this kind of position without position or identity? Is it not the position of the Lacanian subject? For, according to this theory, human identity is made of an endlessly moving and slipping chain of signifiers, moved by, and resting in its very lack. And precisely at the place of the signifier's lack, the human libidinal being imagines himself being the bearer of those signifiers. It is there he imagines himself being a subject. This means that, *consciously*, he considers himself as the free and self-assured subject that, since Descartes, modernity always told him to be. *Unconsciously* however, he is not the subject of his own – of his freedom and his certainty – but the subject of *a desire* to be free and certain. And he owes this desire not from himself, but from the Other. He is the subject of “the desire of the Other”, as sounds another of Lacan's formula's.²⁷ In other words, he is the subject of an unfulfilled – and unfulfillable – desire. He bears this desire on the very place where it is marked by a void; therefore, his desire will forever remain unfulfilled. He is the subject of a desire that never will obtain the ‘real’ he longs to be. A fictitious subject of a fictitious desire: this is, at the level of the unconscious, his basic condition.

This description corresponds perfectly to the post-modern condition. Yet, it describes an *unconscious* condition, and here, ‘unconscious’ is to be read in the strictly psychoanalytical sense of the word. It is not something that once *was* conscious and ever *will* become conscious again. In psychoanalytical perspective, the unconscious is the very condition of consciousness. The unconscious is the base upon which rests all consciousness and knowledge (including scientific and – even – psychoanalytical knowledge). It is the radical unknown – and unknowable – that makes knowledge possible at all.

A psychoanalytical cure, for instance, does not awaken someone's unconscious; it rather confronts him with its irreversibility. It is a confrontation with the lack of consciousness being consciousness' very support, its ‘subject’. At that very place, the analysant is confronted with ‘himself’ as being the subject of both his conscious and his unconscious ‘knowledge’. There, he meets ‘himself’ as being the subject of the signifying chain representing him – or, what amounts to the same thing, as being the subject of desire, which basically is not his, but the Other's desire. The result is not exactly regained self-

²⁶ See, among many publication: Rosi Braidotti (1994): *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press; C. Kaplan (1996), *Questions of Travel, Postmodern Discourse and Displacement*, Durham: Duke University Press.

²⁷ “Le désir de l'homme est le désir de l'Autre”, in: J. Lacan (1966), *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, p. 814.

consciousness. Of course, there is a kind of ‘insight’, but not a direct one, conceivable and transformable into a concept. It is more something one catches in a moment of a “looking awry” (quoting the title of one of Slavoj Žižek’s books²⁸). The most profound confrontation with the unconscious offers only a short and indirect glimpse of insight that never can be turned into full knowledge.

Only now we can throw some Lacanian light on the potential cynicism of post-modern consciousness. Cynicism is not to be imputed to the content of post-modernity’s claim that all is fiction and nothing is real. For, indeed, we do not approach things as real but as signifier and, thus, as fiction: this is the very axiom of Lacanian theory. Post-modernity’s cynicism depends rather on its subject-position, i.e. on the way one takes position towards himself being implicated in that claim. He is cynic when he simply denies the problematic status of the fictitious shape he is in, i.e. when he denies that the acknowledged fiction *goes for himself as well*. The cynic oversees that he himself as well as his claim are as fictitious as the fictions he is talking about.

That is why it is not enough to criticize post-modernism’s claim as being *contradictory in itself*. This is what a purely logical analysis would do, saying that, when everything is fiction, this very assertion is fictitious too, and thus invalid. Although valid in itself, this argument opens the way to the Cartesian solution of the contradictory claim, and therefore risks missing the real problem. For doubting if not everything is but fiction, indeed, confronts me with myself being the subject of my doubt. And— as Descartes has shown — the only conclusion to be drawn then is that this subject necessarily escapes all fiction. Underneath the contradiction of a declared fiction, only a ‘real’ and self-assured subject can be supposed.

Unintentionally, a purely logical analysis treating post-modernism’s claim as contradiction uncovers the Cartesian subject it still supposes. It shows how we, post-moderns, are still much more Cartesian than we like to admit: we secretly keep supposing our world is grounded in a self-assured ‘subject’. It is not simply a coincidence either when post-modernism, while criticizing classical bourgeois capitalistic mentality, in fact supports this mentality: for both the bourgeois and the postmodern attitude suppose a free independent subject taking position in front of the world, denying the subject’s dependency on that world. Here, we meet the typical form of current cynicism using criticism mainly to let untouched

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek (1991), *Looking Awry. An introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge (Mss) / London: The MIT Press.

what it criticizes. Criticism is mainly used to establish the critic as a self-assured, ‘full’ subject. The only difference with Descartes is that post-modern cynicism does this *secretly*.

So, saying that the world is fictitious, without ground, deprived of any real truth, *and* saying this is a contradiction in itself do both deny the ‘real’ status of the modern subject, i.e. that this subject lacks any ‘real’ ground and that this lack as well as the subject itself cannot be the object of full knowledge. Both deny that the subject is basically not the subject of (self-)consciousness, but of the unconscious.

However, what then is the *alternative* of this denial, since a fully conscious affirmation of our fictional status as subject is impossible? It is here we have to introduce another particularity of Lacanian psychoanalytical logic. For, in psychoanalysis, the opposite of *denial* is not affirmation but *repression* (*Verdrängung*). The psychoanalytical concept of repression does not refer to a gesture keeping things somewhere deep under the ground in order to remain unknown and forgotten. Repression is a much more ‘superficial’ procedure, where one knows *and* at the same time does not really know what he knows. Of course we know that life is an unbearable lightness (just like we admire Kundera’s book of that name), but, nevertheless (and fortunately), we do not *really* know what we know: this is what Freud called “Verdrängung”. On the level of content, the unconscious is basically traumatic; and repressing this trauma, we surely know of it, but we do not *really* know what it is. And the experience of the unconscious learns precisely that, the more we get close to that trauma (and it is possible to get close to it; this is what happens in a psychoanalytical cure), the more we get affected by the impossibility to really get in touch with it. The experience of the unconscious coincides with the experience of its necessary repression. This is why the end of a psychoanalytical cure does not so much remove as re-establish repression. In its final moment, we meet repression as knowing’s horizon, or, which amounts to the same thing, we encounter the unconscious as the horizon and the base of consciousness.

Whereas repression is ‘knowing without really knowing’, *denial*, on the contrary, presumes to know what one knows, for it supposes consciousness to be its own ground or subject. Indeed, claiming that science has its ground in itself, denies its own limits to be its ground. This is why, on the level of the unconscious, denial is the most basic attitude of modern science. Modern science presumes that the limits of knowledge lay *before* us – that they hide what is *still* not known, and therefore once *will* be known. This way science denies its basic finitude: it does not recognize its limits to be the very base upon which it rests. It is its way to deny the unknown as knowledge’s very ground. Only its radical finitude makes science possible. For only this gives modern science what it lives by, i.e. its desire (for

knowledge) – a desire which it structurally denies. Surely, it expresses its desire to know more and more about reality, but it does not acknowledge desire's *primacy*, and that, therefore, it rests upon an unfulfillable desire.

This denial is responsible for the extremely progressive élan of modern science. Yet, this progression – and, thus, the denial of knowledge's finitude – is not without danger, for it drives human desire for knowledge beyond its own limits, which, in this case, means that it threatens the ground – the subject – upon which it rests. This is to say that it drives knowledge to a point where it has no longer any grip upon 'itself' and risks destroying itself. This is knowledge's death-drive, which for the first time has been revealed in the construction of nuclear weapons. Working on this high-tech tour de force, science was working on a possible destruction of the entire world, including itself, and it had no tools at all to reflect upon this problem. In a world-wide nuclear catastrophe, science literally blows up its own subject – which is in fact only the extreme consequence of the way it structurally denies its subject.

This kind of dangerous nihilism slumbers in post-modern cynicism as well. Claiming that nothing is what it is, it risks realizing this 'nothing' in a catastrophic way. For, despite of its huge criticism, it let the criticized problems untouched and paralyses any critical potentiality. This makes us blind for the ground we rest upon, a ground, which is in fact groundless. It is at the locus of this very groundlessness that we 'play' to be the subject of the word. Remaining blind for the highly problematic status of that locus – and, thus, of the subject – makes the 'game' we play extremely dangerous.

However, once again, how to recognize and assume this highly problematic subject, if self-consciousness cannot but deny it? How to recognize that, in a world without any ground, my consciousness about it, has no ground either? How to recognize this, and not become the cynic bourgeois post-modernist who secretly re-establish himself as a self-assured Cartesian subject?

In a way, Lacan's entire 'teaching' – the annual seminars he gave from the early fifties till the late seventies – form one long reflection on this problem. When, now, I will zoom in on one particular moment in Lacan's thought, it is because, there, he links this problem with Christianity. Assuming the finitude of the human subject might be the task of both modernity and post-modernity, it is one of the central issues of Christianity as well. And here, too, the possibility of cynicism is never far away. Only after facing the possibility of Christian cynicism, Lacan was forced to change substantially, not only his view on this particular problem, but also his entire theory of the subject. But let us first see how, historically, Christianity and (philosophical) cynicism relate to each other.

6. ... a Christian Legacy

Many scholars agree that, in the first centuries of its history, Christianity had some affinity with cynicism. The cynics, being no 'academic' philosophers but 'preachers' talking and discussing with the 'men in the street', might very well have influenced early Christian preachers, and even the apostles or Jesus himself.²⁹ Jesus' reference, for instance, to the birds in the sky as an example of how people should leave all human preoccupations behind, and live by what Nature and Heaven gives ("Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns ...", Mathew 6, 26): this could as well have been said by any cynic philosopher of that time. Also the ideal of radical asceticism performed by John the Baptist and by early Christian desert fathers are often very similar to forms of cynic behavior. Antique cynicism, after all, did not stand for pure negativism, but promoted a new positive ethics. Of course, this ethics implies a radically 'negative' criticism towards all other existing ways of life. But was this not also the case with Christian criticism, which declared the entire existing civilization as being false in the light of the true godly reign to come? Did the Christians not live as if all earthly reality was already judged and blown away in an apocalyptic catastrophe?

Anyhow, both Christianity and cynicism renounced the existing world with its generally accepted values. Cynicism criticized people's idle longings, and proposed them to live an extremely simple natural life leaving civilization behind. Christianity longed for a totally new world where, now, nature was left behind and replaced by a supernatural eternal life reuniting man with God. But both were equally critical towards existing reality. Cynicism criticized everything and everyone in order to preserve almost nothing; Christianity did the same in order to preserve the highest thing there is, God.

And even both their aims were not that different. This is, at least, what Christian mysticism claimed. For the God the mystics longed for often ended up being nothing. The most exquisite example is, of course, the sketch John of the Cross' draws for the *Ascent of the mount Carmel*: a description of the way the soul has to go in order to obtain the satisfaction of

²⁹ F. Gerald Downing (1988), *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and other Radical Preachers in First-Century Tradition*, JSOT Manuals 4, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; (1993), *Cynics and Christian Origins*, Edingburg: Clark; (1998), *Cynics and Christian Origins II*, London: Routledge. See also: A.J. Visser (1956), *Cynische filosofie en christendom*, Groningen: J.B. Wolters. Already Bultmann wrote on this issue: Rudolf Bultmann (1984), *Der Stil der Paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe*, Nachdruck 1910, mit einem Geleitwort von Hans Hübner, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

its mystical desire, i.e. the reunion with God.³⁰ This reunion is described in terms that can easily be interpreted as ‘cynical’. So, John of the Cross literally writes:

The way to the mount Carmel taken by the perfect [ie. the mystic] [...] [is] “nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and on top of the mount [is] nothing.

Desire for God equals longing for nothing: any cynic philosopher could as well have pronounced this Christian paradox.

This is to say, however, that the central issue here is desire as such. Both Christian longing for God and cynic longing for the simplest life locate desire’s satisfaction in ‘nothing’ rather than something, and in this sense, they both celebrate desire *as such* – a desire that, even satisfied, keeps on desiring. All we long for – including even God – is idle, not because it is idle *in itself*, but because it leads us away from reality, i.e. from desire as such, from the unsatisfiable desire we ‘are’.

Neither the cynic nor the mystic view of desire is incompatible with Lacanian theory, which acknowledges desire’s satisfaction to be indeed ‘nothing’. Since desire is to be thought as *primary* – since we *are* desire – we can only find ‘real’ satisfaction in what finally *keeps* us desiring. ‘Nothing’ can satisfy desire; so, it is precisely the nothingness of its satisfaction that keeps desire – and thus human life – going on. *Being* desire, we are constantly surfing over a slippery surface of signifiers; and the ultimate signifier we long for will never appear, for a signifier only exist by referring to other signifiers. The universe of signifiers in which (and by which) we live, allows desire ‘cynically’ to take us for a ride, but yet, this is precisely what makes us living.

This kind of cynical procedure is not absent in Christianity either, so Lacan must explicitly have thought at one of the turning points in his oeuvre. In his sixth seminar (1958-59)³¹, which is precisely on “desire and its interpretation”, his theory comes very close to what a twentieth century Christian mystic, Simone Weil, writes. In one of her books, *La pesanteur et la grâce*³², quoted a few times in Lacan’s seminar that year³³, Weil performs her view of religion. Rather than a belief (in the Kantian, rationalist sense of ‘assuming without knowing’), religion is a ‘culture’ of desire, so Weil argues. There, God is the name for the

³⁰ For a detailed interpretation of John of the Cross’s mysticism, see: Denys Turner (1995), *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 226-251.

³¹ Jacques Lacan (1996), *Le séminaire, Livre VI, Le désir et son interprétation: 1958-1959*, Paris, Publication hors commerce de l’Association Freudienne Internationale.

³² Simone Weil (1948), *La pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris: Plon; (1987), *Gravity and grace*, London: Ark ; (1952), *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Craufurd, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

³³ Lacan 1996: 100, 333, 342, 410.

ultimate object of desire, which, for this reason, lacks any weight. All other things – people’s preoccupations, their worries, anxieties, troubles, et cetera – make life weigh upon them. These things represent the principle of “*pesenteur*” – of weight or gravity. In fact, so Weil claims, we live by life’s lightness or grace (“*grâce*”). Things weigh, because we got attached to them and invest our desire in them. This is why, to set free our desire, we have to get *detached* from all we long for. The purest desire as well as the highest satisfaction we can get is to become disengaged from everything there is, and to have finally nothing.

So, precisely in his quality of being nothing, God is able to liberate our desire. Behind everything we long for, we should long for the supreme good, and to call this good ‘God’ means precisely that desire’s supreme satisfaction is that extreme kind of ‘nothing’. For Weil, religious life is a culture of desire oriented towards (this) nothing.³⁴ Instead of giving consolation and comfort, religion’s most important aim is to deliberate us from the wish for comfort and help us to obtain an unconsolated and purified desire.³⁵

In his seminar on desire³⁶, Lacan embraces Weil’s insight, because of its remarkable similarity with his own theory of desire. Since, as Lacan claims, we *are* desire (including desire for ourselves), we find ourselves – our subject – in a paradoxical nothing that keeps desire ongoing. This ‘nothing’ is conceptualized in his theory as the lack of the void the signifier (i.e. the ‘matter’ our desire lives by) rests upon. Precisely at the locus of this lack, the libidinal human being imagines himself being a subject – which, on the level of the unconscious, means that, at this place, he realizes himself as the subject/bearer of the desire of the Other.

For Weil’s religion the world – which is a world of desire – rests in God’s graceful ‘nothing’. In Lacanian terms, the world of signifiers – the symbolic order – rests in the signifier ‘as such’, i.e. in the lack that keeps signifiers endlessly referring to other signifiers. The world, being a symbolic universe, rests in its void, and so, gives space to the radical desire man ‘is’. Simone Weil’s godly ‘nothing’ in which she locates creature’s inner center

³⁴ In *La pesenteur et la grace*, she writes: “Always, beyond the particular object whatever it may be, we have to fix our will on the void [*vouloir à vide*], to will the void. For the good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us. But this void is fuller than all fullness. [...]. The good seems to us as a nothingness, since there is no *thing* that is good. But this nothingness is not unreal. Compared with it, everything in existence is unreal” (quoted in Simone Weil [1986], *An Anthology*, edited and introduced by Siân Miles, London: Virago Press, p. 278. For the original French text, see Weil 1948: 15).

³⁵ That is why atheism is necessary stage on our way to God. In a notobook of 1941/42, she writes: “La religion en tant que source de consolation est un obstacle à la véritable foi, et en ce sens l’athéisme est une purification.” On the same page, she refers to John of the Cross, for whom faith is a “night” in which desire has to be purified; and, so she adds: “L’athéisme, l’incrédulité constituent un équivalent à cette purification.” (Simone Weil 1999: 858).

³⁶ Jacques Lacan (1996), *Le séminaire, Livre VI, Le désir et son interprétation: 1958-1959*, Paris, Publication hors commerce de l’Association Freudienne Internationale, p. 100, 333, 342, 410.

coincides with the ‘nothing’ supporting the symbolic universe. So, in the eyes of Weil as well as in those of Lacan, it is up to man to acknowledge the desire he ‘is’ and to occupy the place of this ‘nothing’. Only there, in this (human or godly) ‘nothing’, desire rests in itself, i.e. in its very lack (of final satisfaction). There, in this ‘nothing’, desire comes full circle.

And yet, here lays precisely the whole problem.

For the idea of desire coming full circle is not without ambiguity, so Lacan will discover while reflecting upon Weil’s theory of desire. Of course, this theory affirms desire as human’s basic condition and, thus, emphasizes our radical finitude. We are never what we are, we are only desire (for it). This, indeed, seems to be a genuine expression of our finitude. Does it, however, not at the same time express the exact opposite? If ‘nothing’ limits desire, then, does this ‘nothing’ not render desire *infinite*? And is this ‘nothing’ not the point where desire meets itself – and, thus, *masters* itself? Do we not face here desire’s perfect self-appropriation? Limited by ‘nothing’, desire seems mastering everything. And, what is more: if we, being the subject of desire, occupy the ‘nothing’ in which desire is based, we fully participate in its self-appropriation. In this case, desire re-installs our position of autonomous subject in the Cartesian sense of the term. If desire has its ground in itself, and if we coincide with this ground (i.e. this ‘nothing’), then, we are again, instead of subjected to desire (i.e. being the subject of the desire *of the Other*), desire’s subjects *in the most classical sense of the word*, i.e. in the way a Cartesian subject is master over himself – and perhaps even in the way the godly Subject is master over the universe. Being the nothing in which desire comes full circle, we seem to share the position of God *infinitely* ruling the realm of finite desire.

This ambiguity is inherent to the Christian theory of desire as performed in the work of Simone Weil. On the one hand, it acknowledges the radical finitude of human desire, marked as it is by a radical lack that keeps it from becoming a closed ‘self’, a non-alienated full identity. It comes to ‘itself’ only in ‘nothing’; ‘nothing’ appropriates it. On the other hand, however, Christian religion – and monotheistic religion in general – too easily writes this ‘nothing’ with a capital, thus giving desire a new substantial ground. It grounds desire in an instance called No-thing, an instance beyond anything. Such a ‘capitalized’ Nothing gives desire again a full ‘identity’, declaring it being identical to itself. Here, desire is no longer the realm of the irretrievable difference – of what Lacan calls the Other – but becomes the realm of the Self. Even being Nothing, God guarantees the totality of desire as being based in itself, as being an infinite Self. The reference to a God – however *nothing* He may be – allows a *sublation* of desire’s finitude (in the sense of a Hegelian *Aufhebung*). It is a way to appropriate its radical inappropriability, its absolute Otherness. In this case, affirming desire’s finitude

coincides secretly with reinstalling an infinite and absolute position. Openly claiming Gods nothingness, we suppose ourselves to be, like God, masters over desire and finitude.

The ambiguity at stake here is due to the possibility of both interpretations at *the same time*. A reference to God acknowledges the radical finitude and groundlessness of human desire, but at the same time concerns the One in whom – even in his quality of being Nothing – the finite order of desire finds its infinite ground. Crucial is that, referring to God, one always takes *both positions at the same time*. While acknowledging finitude, one already takes an infinite position ‘sublating’ the finitude he claims. For, he is talking *in the very name* of the impossible infinite, and this talking as such sublates the finitude at stake here turning it into an absolute and infinite position. Claiming that no one can speak in Gods name, one already has appropriated this impossibility and, thus, taken Gods position. Even when he speaks in the name of a God being ‘nothing’, he speaks from a point in which rests the universe of desire. In other words: speaking in the name of desire itself, secretly excludes desire from his own speaking. He secretly occupies a position outside finite desire – a position in which desire becomes full circle and enjoys complete satisfaction. The logic at stake here is a *double bind* one, in which a claim at the same time asserts the opposite, so that one always is in the right. Affirming finitude, one performs an infinite position; and claiming an infinite position, one can always say that this position is only allowed to God, even when He is Nothing.

Here we face the core of Lacan’s criticism towards Christianity. Surely, like Lacan’s own theory, Christianity in its purest form is an acknowledgment of the finite desire we ‘are’, but it claims this finitude from a standpoint that at the same time sublates finitude and secretly re-installs ourselves as being subjects in the classical (Cartesian) sense of the word.

This kind of ambiguity is far from being absent in current postmodernism. Not unlike Christianity, post-modernism too is an attempt to acknowledge human finitude and the groundlessness of the desire we ‘are’. This is why it declares there are no longer great stories or wider contexts to guarantee truths as solid as the ones we had in former times. In fact, post-modernism repeats the basic experience of early modernity, as explored in the famous ‘Pascalian anxiety’. It is the fearful consciousness of being lost in a universe deprived of any fixed coordinate; or, put in Pascal’s geometrical terms: we live in “an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere”.³⁷ We lost any fixed ‘ground’ and fell into absolute alienation.

³⁷ Pascal (1976), *Pensées*, texte établi par Léon Brunschvicg, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, p. 65 (Brunschvicg numeration : n° 72).

Basically, postmodernism contains the same elements, *except precisely anxiety*. We know that things lost all ground, and that truths are contingent and relative, but we do no longer, like Pascal, feel anxious about it. On the contrary, this makes us feeling free. For now, we secretly suppose *ourselves* to be the ‘ground’ – or subject – of those things. Of course, we know we are not the subject of our world in the way Descartes had in mind; we know even we are not the subject of ourselves. But we nevertheless act *as if* this is the case. Not in our sciences. For there, although unproved, we suppose the things themselves to be the subject of our scientific claims. Yet, besides the world of scientific certainties, we keep acknowledging the uncertainty and the groundlessness our postmodern culture deals with. Yet, just like science, postmodern doubt put us on a position as safe and fixed as the Cartesian *cogito*. Affirming there are no truths, we secretly promote ourselves to be the last and only truth. Indeed ‘secretly’, and this is what makes us the postmodern cynics we are. Cynically criticizing every presumed truth has become our current way of (secretly) installing ourselves as subjects of absolute truth.

Here, again, the logic is double bind. We can claim there are no truths at all, and *at the same time* hold to scientific certainties. In both cases we deny the absolute character of the position we take, installing ourselves as limitlessly self-assured subjects. Saying there are no longer certainties (as postmodern ideology claims) *and* saying certainties has nothing to do with us because they are ‘facts’ ascertained by science hide both the same position of an absolutely self-assured subject. The denial in both claims is the core of contemporary cynicism.

The double bind logic installing an absolute subject, is operating even in the most modest and intelligent form of Christianity (in Simone Weil for instance). Yet, despite of its criticism upon Christianity, post-modernism, too, holds to the same double bind logic, producing a similar kind of absolute subject. It is here we meet the very base of today’s cynicism.

7. Post-modern Cynicism: Between Sublimation and Perversion

However, does Lacan’s own theory escape that kind of double bind logic and the cynicism it generates? This is the question Lacan faces when he discovers how similar his own thought is to Simone Weil’s remarks on desire. His intention, too, was to acknowledge desire’s finitude by stressing that ‘nothing’ can satisfy it. In his theory, this ‘nothing’ was not defined as God (as Weil does), but as the signifier’s lack, as the lack in which the symbolic order rests, and,

therefore, keeps desire ongoing. There, on the locus of that lack, the human libidinal being constitutes the ground of his fictional identity as being the bearer (the subject) of that symbolic order and, thus, of the desire of the Other. But did this not enable the subject to speak in the name of desire, and to appropriate desire's full circle? Did such a theory not re-install a full, Cartesian subject, being master over desire precisely by saying that nothing masters desire? Was this not the same ambiguity as discovered in the Christian theory of desire performed by Weil: affirming that the universe rests in a God who is finally nothing, nevertheless enables us to talk in the name of that godly nothing and, so, to appropriate the point in which the universe rests. Is Lacan's theory after all not supposing a full subject mastering desire's very finitude?

Lacan could only endorse this critical question. This is why, at that moment in his oeuvre, he felt forced to modify the very core of his entire theory. And indeed, a few months later, he worked out modified view on the kind of 'nothing' by which desire is satisfied and in which it rests. In his seventh seminar (on "the ethics of psychoanalysis"), the ultimate object of desire is no longer defined as the signifier's lack, but as a "thing" beyond the signifier.³⁸ Although the signifier's lack – the 'nothing' in which it rests – is still a privileged object of desire (keeping desire ongoing), the ultimate object must be situated *beyond* the signifier and its lack. This object, too, is considered to be lacking in the realm of signifiers, but not in the same way as the lack constituting the signifier. The ultimate object – the "thing" – is supposed to be even different from the 'order of difference', which is the symbolic order. It is an object lacking in a not-symbolic way.

Here, Lacan rediscovered the dimension of the *real* as a decisive point in the structure of the subject. We saw already that, according to Lacan, the human libidinal being does not live in the realm of the real. Seeking for pleasure, the infant could not get it immediately from the real, but only by mediation, i.e. from the Other offering signifiers to the baby in which it could constitute itself as the subject of desire (of the Other). Cut off from the real, this realm of signifiers is desire's proper, fictitious element, in which it can infinitely 'slide' around. Being cut off from the real, it can be satisfied by 'nothing' and, thus, survive satisfaction. If satisfaction should be real, desire really should stop desiring, which – since man 'is' desire – would imply his death. That is why, once again, nothing but fiction – and, thus, in a sense

³⁸ Jacques Lacan (1986), *Le séminaire, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, p. 55-86; (1992), *The ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, translated by Dennis Porter, London & New York: Routledge, p. 43-70.

‘nothing’ – supports our desire. It is certainly not supported by the real, for the real satisfaction man longs for implies necessarily man’s death.

And yet, so Lacan claims after his confrontation with Weil, the real is nevertheless an important factor in desire’s economy. For desire remains structurally orientated towards it. Of course, desire operates in the fictitious world of the signifier (just like religious faith operates in fictions, and therefore keeps desire ongoing), but, nonetheless, what he really wants is *real* satisfaction. Changing the real for the signifier’s ‘nothing’ is indeed a solution, but it is not the whole story. In his seventh seminar, Lacan discovered that the most basic tendency of desire is to go *beyond* the signifier and its ‘nothing’. It is ultimately there its final object is to be located. So, desire’s most basic tendency is to transgress its own limits.

This changes the definition of desire’s satisfaction, i.e. of ‘*jouissance*’ (enjoyment).³⁹ In enjoyment, the libidinal being gets its desired object. Only, this is no longer conceived as obtaining the ‘nothing’ that keeps desire ongoing. Now, ‘enjoyment’ *transgresses* the order operating with nothing (i.e. with the lack the signifier is based upon); for, now, its object is *real*. If this kind of enjoyment is not lethal (for, indeed, *real* enjoyment implies death), it is because at its very moment, the subject fades away. Enjoyment goes hand in hand with an ‘eclipse’ of desire’s subject, thus Lacan’s new conceptualization. This is to say that the subject is by definition not able to be present at the very moment of enjoyment. It can long for enjoyment, it can nostalgically remember it, but the moment it occurs, it cannot be present with it.⁴⁰

Lacan’s new way to conceptualize desire and enjoyment enables him to avoid the trap of Christian or post-modern re-appropriation of desire (or, more generally, of human finitude). For, now, the satisfaction of desire does no longer re-install desire’s subject. The ‘nothing’ desire longs for is not the final object of desire, and thus the point in which desire meets itself. Surely, desire meets itself – i.e. its final support – when, in enjoyment, it conquers its ultimate object; but precisely at that moment, so Lacan argues, desire loses its subject. The ultimate object is a ‘thing’ in which desire *does not find but loses* its subject. In enjoyment, the subject gets lost – at least on the level of the symbolic (on the level of the real, this would imply its death). At that moment, the libidinal apparatus, which is made out of signifiers, loses its

³⁹ Lacan 1986: 225-241; 1992: 191-204.

⁴⁰ This is what Lacan means by “La jouissance est interdite à qui parle comme tel” (“Enjoyment is forbidden for the one who is talks like that): Lacan 1966: 821. Note that Lacan, even in his new definition of enjoyment, is very close to Weil: “Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object no corner is left for saying ‘I’.” (Weill 1986: 104; for the original French text, see: Weil 1948: 35).

fictional ground (the subject): the opaque, ‘transgressive’ object it is oriented towards becomes the only consistent factor holding its signifiers together.

Here, unlike in the former theory, it is clear that desire is excluded from any kind of self-appropriation. At the moment desire finds ‘itself’ (i.e. at the moment of enjoyment), desire loses ‘itself’ - i.e. loses its subject. So, a subject of self-appropriation is impossible here, whereas in the first theory, this was calculated in the ambiguous way the subject could manipulate his double bind position. Being subjected to the signifier, obtaining the nothing in which it was based, the subject was always able to appropriate desire’s ground. Here, desire’s ground is an object, and, at the very moment the object is enjoyed, the subject fades away and remains absent.

Here, Lacan’s idea about ‘culture of desire’ gets modified too. Of course, it is still a celebration of the ‘nothing’ in which desire gets satisfied, but, now, this ‘nothing’ is a ‘thing’ desire circles *around*. Such a ‘culture’ is considered as sublimation (i.e. the ‘healthy’ way to treat impossible desire), which is now defined as a “fashioning of signifiers” where one of them is put apart and “raised [...] to the dignity of the Thing”, in order to let the other signifiers circle around it.⁴¹ One of Lacan’s major example of sublimation is courtly love. There, the Lady is ‘raised to the dignity of the Thing’, which means that the lover’s desire consciously is performed only circling around her without ever reaching her. However abstract and idealized she is, she is never approached as being Nothing (like Simone Weil’s God). She precisely stands for the *impossibility* to reduce the ultimate object of desire to Nothing. She is the Thing beyond the ‘nothing’ supporting the signifier. Here, desire is explicitly disabled to come full circle. The desiring subject cannot go ‘through’ the ultimate ‘nothing’ his desire is aiming at in order to appropriate desire’s totality. He can only circle around it, incapable of passing through the object of his desire. Being the final support of desire, the object bars the subject to appropriate the limits of desire.

Yet, what happens if one, nevertheless, appropriates the limits of desire, and talks in the name of desire’s self-appropriation? His position, then, can no longer be considered as being the ‘nothing’ keeping desire ongoing, but as a position *beyond* desire – a position enjoying desire’s satisfaction. Yet, we know now that, in enjoyment, a subject-position is impossible. There, the subject can only be absent (i.e. fade away). So if one, nonetheless, claims to occupy this position, he or she can only do so by *denying* its very impossibility.

⁴¹ Lacan 1986: 133; 1992: 113.

This kind of *denial* is the core of what Lacan defines as ‘perversion’, in contrast with the (more ‘normal’) neurosis. In neurosis the impossibility to master desire – i.e. to be really present with enjoyment – is repressed (*Verdrängung*). Of course, we know we cannot get real satisfaction, but we at the same time do not *really* know that, and, for that very reason, we are able by times to live enjoyment. In other words: we repress enjoyment’s impossibility on the level of the real and, this way, a symbolic enjoyment is possible. The pervert, however, supposes enjoyment to be possible at the level of the real. To ‘prove’ this to himself, he sets up a tricky scene, in which he first projects upon the other enjoyment’s impossibility; and once the other is clearly branded by it, he then radically denies it. The scene a sadist performs illustrates this very clearly. In order to deny with himself any kind of lack – i.e. desire, finitude, failing enjoyment, death, et cetera – the sadist literally carves these characteristics into the body of the other; and once the other bears the signs of finitude (pain, suffering, longing, imploring, begging, et cetera), he denies them and does as if the other is really enjoying. The more the victim suffers, the more the sadist denies suffering exists at all. His purpose is not to kill the other, but to put him in the position of a *eternally* dying person, of a person who, while dying, doesn’t die: this is his way to prove that death doesn’t exist, that desire has no limits and enjoyment is *really* possible.

Here we meet the sadist’s *cynicism*: he knows very well how sadly his victim is suffering, but he uses this very knowledge to do nothing against it and to make himself believe that suffering is no problem at all, that in fact nothing is problematic and all is pure enjoyment. In a sense, the example of sadist perversion illuminates the cruel denial at work in post-modern cynicism as well. On its most basic level, it is a procedure of denial making the other to its victim. It is not post-modernism’s relativism that makes it dangerous and suspect, nor does its telling that all great stories are death (for, in a sense, they are dead). Dangerous is first of all the kind of subject it supposes. *Supposing secretly a self-assured (Cartesian) subject, it projects all relativism upon the other, in order to be there, with the other, radically denied.*

Think, for instance, to the contemporary cynicism of the Western world towards the ‘South’ (i.e. to what, two decennia’s ago, was called the ‘Third World’). The West no longer pretends to represent the world-standard of civilization, as we have done in times of colonialism or other kinds of economic and cultural hegemony. We claim that no culture can privilege itself above other cultures. On the contrary, all cultures are equal because they are equally deprived of ‘real’ ground. That is why, so post-modernism claims, cultural relativism is the answer to the false Western hegemony of the past. However, the cynical result of this

strategy is that, despite of those beautiful declarations, the West unabatedly remains the standard civilization of the globalized world. What we in fact do is secretly projecting our own relativism upon other cultures in order to deny it with ourselves. By showing how relative *they* are, we secretly – but efficiently – deny the relative character of *our own* culture. That is why we literally have become *cynical*: we know it is false to pretend to be master of the world, and, nevertheless we do not stop acting as if this is the case. The danger of that cynicism lies in its *perverse* character, making the other the victim of the relativism we deny.

It is not easy to escape this cynicism, and Lacanian theory cannot provide a clear-cut solution either. But it can at least show that the crucial point does not lie in what is said, but in the subject supposed – and produced - by this saying. Postmodern cynicism should not be criticized for what it claims, but for the subject it secretly installs. More precisely, this subject can be supposed to occupy the place of the final object of the desire at work in this claim. This ‘perverse’ position secretly makes victims, and, and therefore, must be detected and unmasked. This task of unmasking coincides with the basic ethical injunction of post-modern criticism – an ethical injunction in the Kantian sense, for it will never be able to completely fulfill it. Against this postmodern cynicism Lacan can, besides this ethical imperative, only propose a renewed ‘culture of desire’, a new sublimation. In a way, his own project to re-conceptualize Freud’s psychoanalysis intends to be a contribution to that new culture, although Lacan is convinced that psychoanalysis as such is not made for creating directly new forms of culture of sublimation.

Let us, in a last point, investigate if religion is able to offer such a new culture of desire, countering contemporary cynicism.

8. ‘Thy Shall Not Deny the Place of A God’

It is already clear that, at least in a Lacanian perspective, Christianity – although a high-level ‘culture of desire’ – is not the best remedy against the tricks and ruses operating in contemporary cynicism. Lacan’s reflection on Simone Weil showed that the Christian God too easily opens to an ambiguity that leads to the perverse tricks described above. It is true, God being the ultimate thing we long for can be acknowledged as ‘nothing’ and, so, operate as a signifier affirming the primacy of desire. However, this ‘nothing’ is, so to say, *not enough nothing*: it enables talking in the name of desire’s full circle. The one doing so occupies the position, not of the ‘nothing’ in which desire is supposed to rest, but of the ‘thing’ beyond desire – a thing that does not allow any subject-position at all. Except, of

course, when one ‘perversely’ denies the impossibility of ‘subjectivizing’ desire’s ultimate object. And, as shown above, the ruse of perversion is never without victims.

Or, to put it in proper Christian terms: the crucial point, here, is our incapability, not of talking in God’s name, but of talking in the name of this very impossibility. For this, too, is a way to appropriate (and, thus, to sublimate) human finitude, and to turn it into an infinite powerful position, which is always in the right, whatever is said against it. So, Lacan’s thesis, here, is that even the impossibility of speaking in God’s name cannot be the most basic support of religious culture. Religion’s final support, its *raison d’être*, is an object kept at distance, i.e. an object that cannot be subjectivized. God, being the ultimate object of human desire, can indeed only be affirmed as an *object at distance*.

It is precisely this kind of distance Christianity has bridged and even annulated: in Christ, God becomes human and human beings are told to be in direct communion with God. Or, which amounts to the same thing: God is the Word become flesh and the flesh become Word. The Christian God is the symbolic God *par excellence*. In a way, He is the symbolic order; He is the Word incarnated into our flesh, allowing our flesh to participate in God. In Christ, God died, but this was his way to save the ‘world of the flesh’ in order to become Christ’s body, his ecclesial ‘soma’, which is in principle ‘*kat’holic*’, enclosing the entire universe. Christ’s death redeemed the entire universe in order to transfer it into the original realm of the Word – i.e. into the symbolic order. This makes Christianity to an entirely symbolic religion (a religion of the Word or, as Lacan put it, of the signifier). For that very reason, however, it is to be criticized as ‘culture of desire’: denying the status of its object as being real (i.e. not symbolic) – and, therefore, neglecting the distance that separates it from that object – it cannot avoid the trap of perverse cynicism.

Now, one can understand Lacan’s fascination for non-Christian antique religion, although Lacan himself must surely have surprised his audience when, one day during his eighth seminar, he proposed his first reflections about it.⁴² Till then, he had always stressed how decisively Christianity had influenced modernity, precisely because of its emphasis on the Word, i.e. the signifier.⁴³ Only an acknowledgment of the signifier guarantees a ‘culture of desire’. In that sense Christianity’s historical influence is irreversible, and we should not allow our persistent “nostalgia for Ancient Greece” seducing us to go back to ancient pagan

⁴² Jacques Lacan (2001), *Le séminaire, Livre VIII, Le transfert*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, p. 58 ff.

⁴³ Here, Lacan is influenced by Alexandre Koyré (A. Koyré [1994 (1957)], *From the closed world to the infinite universe*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press).

religion.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, by sweeping the pagan gods away, monotheism has destroyed a kind of ‘culture of desire’ that emphasized the real as being the center or desire. For, so Lacan claims, in antique religion, gods were considered not to be symbolic but real. Of course, they were first of all signifiers operating in the existing symbolic system. But, being signifiers, they designated what was *beyond* that symbolic system. They named the real in a way this naming did not entirely cancel their status of being real.

So, in the Antique paganism, we meet religion as sublimation in the precise sense Lacan gives to the term in his seminar on ethics. The gods are signifiers “raised to the level of the Thing”, i.e. to the level of desire’s final object located *beyond* the signifier, in the inaccessible domain of the real. These signifiers have been fashioned in a way human desire can circle around its ultimate object. This is the way Antiquity recognizes the primacy of desire. Here, no one can speak in the name of desire, for the object is by definition inaccessible for human beings. Nobody can speak in the name of a god. And if one does so, as is the case, for instance, with the Pythia, Apollo’s priestess in Delphi, this person is as mad as one can be, neither can anyone understand what she says until, too late, he realizes it was really his own death sentence he heard. Here, the perverse side is entirely part of the gods, which makes it at least clear that the perverse position is inhuman, i.e. that, when a mortal perversely tries to claim the position of a god, he becomes a danger for others as well as for himself.

So, the device of antique pagan religion, in its quality of ‘culture of desire’, could sound : ‘Thy shall not deny the place of a god’; ‘you shall not deny that the final object – and support – of your desire is to be found in a place where, in your quality of being a subject, you cannot be but absent; a place of self-losing enjoyment where only perverse, cynical gods can persists as subject, and towards which you, mortal human being, can only keep distance.’

Of course this device cannot make us go back to ancient pagan religion, and certainly not to the practice of sacrifice, which was one of its vital elements. But this at least suggests that we have to invent a new, modern culture in which this kind of distance can have a central place. We *are* desire and, even more precisely, we *are* the distance keeping us away from our finally desired object. This kind of distance makes us the unnatural being we are, or, which amounts to the same thing, makes our *real* nature (our nature as being *real*) to be irrevocably different from whatever we are or do.

⁴⁴ I refer to the title of Jacques Taminiaux (1967), *La nostalgie de la grèce ancienne*, The Hague: Nijhoff.

In a way, this is also the distance the cynics put in the center of philosophy – and of civilization in general. And this is precisely what made those cynics keeping distance from ‘classical’ philosophy and civilization. This distance – as well as the unbearable object desire keeps distance from – can be linked to the demon at work in both the ‘perverse’ Diogenes as the ‘godly’ Plato.

The same distance is central in post-modernist cynicism as well. Not unlike modernism, post-modernism looks at the world from a distance; it dissociates itself from any fixed position, et cetera. Only, it takes distance, precisely to secretly appropriate this very distance and to retake again an absolute position. We are still locked up in a kind of Hegelian ‘ruse of reason’, and even with the help of Lacanian hyper-dialectics, it remains difficult to ‘catch’ the core of post-modern cynicism, let alone that we should be able to escape it.

In this chapter, I only tried to explain this difficulty and to clarify the question *qua question*. This is at least what, since Diogenes and Descartes, philosophy should do: analyze a question qua question in order to acknowledge its demonic dimension. I hope I was only cynical in this precise sense.