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**cogito  
and  
the  
unconscious**

*Slavoj Žižek,  
editor*

*sic* **2**

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Slavoj Žižek

**Introduction:**

**Cogito as a**

**Shibboleth**

There are two standard ways to approach the relationship between philosophy and psychoanalysis. Philosophers usually search for so-called “philosophical foundations of psychoanalysis”: their premise is that, no matter how dismissive psychoanalysis is of philosophy, it nonetheless has to rely on a series of conceptual presuppositions (about the nature of drives, of reality, etc.) that psychoanalysis itself does not render thematic and that bear witness to the way in which psychoanalysis is only possible within a certain philosophical horizon. On the other hand, psychoanalysts at their worst, indulge in so-called “psychoanalyzing of philosophers,” trying to discern pathological psychic motivations beneath fundamental philosophical attitudes (philosophical idealism as the last vestige of the childish belief in the omnipotency of thoughts; paranoid systematizing as the foundation of the need to form all-embracing philosophical systems, etc.). *Both* these approaches are to be rejected. While the psychoanalytic reduction of philosophy to an expression of psychic pathology is today, deservedly, no longer taken seriously, it is much more difficult to counter the seemingly self-evident claim that psychoanalysis cannot relate anything truly relevant to philosophy, since psychoanalysis must itself rely on a set of philosophical presuppositions that it is unable to reflect upon. What if, however, references to the Freudian subject are not external to philosophy, but can, in fact, tell us something about the modern, Cartesian subject? What if psychoanalysis renders visible something that the modern philosophy of subjectivity

accomplishes without knowing it, its own grounding gesture, which philosophy has to disavow if it is to assume its place within academic knowledge? To use Lacan's pun, what if psychoanalysis renders visible the ex-timate kernel of modern subjectivity, its innermost core that philosophy is not ready to assume, which it tries to keep at a distance—or, to put it in a more fashionable way, what if psychoanalysis renders visible the constitutive *madness* of modern philosophy? We are thus playing a double strategic game: this ex-timate kernel of philosophy is not directly accessible to the psychoanalysis conceived of as a branch of psychology or psychiatry—what we encounter at this level are, of course, the “naive” pre-philosophical theses. What one has to do, is to bring to light the philosophical implications of psychoanalysis, that is, to retranslate, to transpose psychoanalytic propositions back into philosophy, to “elevate them to the dignity of philosophical propositions”: in this way, one is able to discern the ex-timate philosophical kernel of psychoanalysis, since this transposition back into philosophy explodes the standard philosophical frame. This is what Lacan was doing all the time: reading hysteria or obsessional neurosis as a philosophical “attitude of thought towards reality” (the obsessional compulsion to think—“if I stop thinking, I will cease to exist”—as the truth of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*), etc., etc.

Are we thus not again engaged in “psychoanalyzing philosophy”? No, since this reference to madness is strictly internal to philosophy—the whole of modern philosophy, from Descartes onward, involves an inherent reference to the threat of madness, and is thus a desperate attempt to draw a clear line that separates the transcendental philosopher from the madman (Descartes: how do I know I'm not hallucinating reality?; Kant: how to delimit metaphysical speculation from Swedenborgian hallucinatory rambling?). This excess of madness against which modern philosophy fights is the very founding gesture of Cartesian subjectivity. . . . At this point, anyone versed in postmodern deconstructionism will utter a sigh of bored recognition: of course, the Cartesian ego, the self-transparent subject of Reason, is an illusion; its truth is the decentered, split, finite subject thrown into a contingent, nontransparent context, and this is what psychoanalysis renders visible. . . . Things, however, are more complicated. The problem with the central Freudian and Lacanian notions (the unconscious, the subject) is that they function as theoretical

shibboleths. One knows the story of shibboleth from Judges 12:4–6: the difference is visible only from one side, that is, only the people of Gilead perceive the difference in the pronunciation of the word “shibboleth” — the unfortunate people of Ephraim are unaware of any difference and, consequently, cannot grasp at all what they have said wrong, why they have to die. The supreme case of shibboleth in psychoanalytic theory is the very notion of the unconscious: when Freud proposes his thesis on the unconscious psychic processes, philosophers immediately react to it by saying “Of course! We knew this for a long time—Schopenhauer, *Lebensphilosophie*, the primordial Will . . .”; all of a sudden, the place swarms with hermeneutical and other recuperations that endeavor to (re)integrate psychoanalysis into the standard philosophical problematic (by providing its “philosophical foundation”: unconscious is grounded in the opacity of the life-world context, in the latent, nonfulfilled subjective intention, etc.), while the surplus that resists this integration is rejected—for example, in the guise of “Freud’s biologism,” of his “unacceptable speculations on the death drive,” and so on.<sup>1</sup>

It is against this background that one should appreciate the paradoxical achievement of Lacan, which usually passes unnoticed even by his advocates: on the very behalf of psychoanalysis, he returns to the modern rationalist notion of subject. Philosophers and psychoanalysts, of course, promptly exclaim “We are here on our home terrain!” and proceed to reduce the Freudian subject to a psychological subject of introspection, to philosophical self-consciousness, to Nietzschean will to power. . . . Lacan’s underlying thesis here is even more radical than with the unconscious: not only has the Freudian subject nothing to do with the self-transparent, unified self-consciousness, it is the Cartesian subject itself (and its radicalization in German Idealism, from Kant’s transcendental apperception to self-consciousness from Fichte onward) that is already a shibboleth within the domain of philosophy itself: the standard philosophy of subjectivity, as well as the critics of the notion of “unified transcendental subject,” both misrecognize the shibboleth at work here, that is, the gap that separates the Cartesian subject (when it is “brought to its notion” with Kant) from the self-transparent ego, or from man, from the “human person.” What they fail to see is that the Cartesian subject emerges precisely out of the “death of man”: “transcendental subjectivity” is philosophical antihumanism at its purest.

One can see, now, why, in his seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan asserts that the subject of psychoanalysis is none other than the Cartesian *cogito*: the Freudian unconscious emerges through the very reduction of the “person’s” substantial content to the evanescent punctuality of the *cogito*.

In this precise sense, one could say that Martin Luther was the first great antihumanist: modern subjectivity is not announced in the Renaissance humanist celebration of man as the “crown of creation”, that is, in the tradition of Erasmus and others (to which Luther cannot but appear as a “barbarian”), but rather in Luther’s famous statement that man is the excrement who fell out of the God’s anus. Modern subjectivity has nothing to do with the notion of man as the highest creature in the “great chain of being,” as the final point of the evolution of the universe: modern subjectivity emerges when the subject perceives himself as “out of joint,” as *excluded* from the “order of the things,” from the positive order of entities. For that reason, the ontic equivalent of the modern subject is inherently *excremental*: there is no subjectivity proper without the notion that, at a different level, from another perspective, I am a mere piece of shit. For Marx, the emergence of the working-class subjectivity is strictly codependent to the fact that the worker is compelled to sell the very substance of his being (his creative power) as a commodity on the market, that is, to reduce the *agalma*, the treasure, the precious kernel of his being, to an object that can be bought for a piece of money—there is no subjectivity without the reduction of the subject positive-substantial being to a disposable “piece of shit.” In this case of the correlation between the Cartesian subjectivity and its excremental objectal counterpart, we are not dealing merely with an example of what Foucault called the empirico-transcendental couple that characterizes modern anthropology, but, rather, with the split between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated:<sup>2</sup> if the Cartesian subject is to emerge at the level of the enunciation, he is to be reduced to the “almost-nothing” of a disposable excrement at the level of the enunciated content.

Or, to put it in a slightly different way, the intervention of the subject undermines the standard premodern opposition between the universal order and the hubris of a particular force whose egotistic excess perturbs the balance of the universal order: “subject” is the name for the hubris, the excessive gesture, whose very excess grounds the universal order; it



is the name for the pathological abject, *clinamen*, deviation from the universal order, that sustains this very universal order. The transcendental subject is the “ontological scandal,” neither phenomenal nor noumenal, but an excess that sticks out from the “great chain of being,” a hole, a gap in the order of reality, and, simultaneously, the agent whose “spontaneous” activity constitutes the order of (phenomenal) reality. If, for the traditional ontology, the problem was how to deduce chaotic phenomenal reality from the eternal order of the true reality (how to account for the gradual “degeneration” of the eternal order), the problem of the subject is that of the imbalanced excess, hubris, deviation, that sustains the order itself. The central paradox of the Kantian transcendental constitution is that the subject is not the absolute, the eternal grounding principle of reality, but a finite, temporal entity—precisely as such, it provides the ultimate horizon of reality. The very idea of the universe, of the all of reality, as a totality that exists in itself, is thus rejected as a paralogue: what appears as an *epistemological limitation* of our capacity to grasp reality (the fact that we are forever perceiving reality from our finite, temporal standpoint), is the positive *ontological condition* of reality itself.

Our philosophical and everyday common sense identifies the subject with a series of features: the autonomous source of spontaneous, self-originating activity (what German Idealists called “self-positing”); the capacity of free choice; the presence of some kind of “inner life” (fantasizing); etc. Lacan endorses these features, but with a twist: the autonomous source of activity—yes, but only insofar as the subject displaces onto an Other the fundamental passivity of his being (when I am active, I am simultaneously inter-passive, i.e., there is an Other who is passive for me, in my place, like the weepers, the hired women who cry for me at funerals in so-called “primitive” societies); the free choice—yes, but, at its most radical, the choice is a forced one (i.e., ultimately, I have a freedom of choice only insofar as I make the right choice); the presence of fantasizing—yes, but, far from coinciding with the subject in a direct experience of “inner life,” the fundamental fantasy is that which cannot ever be “subjectivized,” that which is forever cut off from the subject. . . . What Lacan focuses on is this specific twist, this additional turn of the screw that confronts us with the most radical dimension of subjectivity.

How, then, does this endeavor of ours relate to Heidegger’s well-

known attempt to “think through” the horizon of subjectivity? From our perspective, the problem with Heidegger is, *in ultima analisi*, the following one: the Lacanian reading enables us to unearth in the Cartesian subjectivity its inherent tension between the moment of excess (the “diabolical Evil” in Kant, the “night of the world” in Hegel) and the subsequent attempts to gentrify-domesticate-normalize this excess. Again and again, post-Cartesian philosophers are compelled, by the inherent logic of their philosophical project, to articulate a certain excessive moment of “madness” inherent to *cogito*, which they then immediately endeavor to “renormalize.” And the problem with Heidegger is that his notion of modern subjectivity does not seem to account for this inherent excess—in short, this notion simply does not “cover” that aspect of *cogito* on account of which Lacan claims that *cogito* is the subject of the unconscious.<sup>3</sup>

One of the basic presumptions of contemporary *doxa* is that the Cartesian *cogito* paved the way for the unheard-of progress of modern science that profoundly affected the everyday life of mankind. Today, however, it seems as if the Cartesian *cogito* itself has acquired the status of a prescientific myth, superseded by the very progress of knowledge it unleashed. For that reason, the title *Cogito and the Unconscious* is bound to give rise to two immediate associations: that it is to be understood as designating the *antagonism* between *cogito* (the transparent subject of self-consciousness) and the unconscious, its opaque Other that subverts the certitudes of consciousness; and, consequently, that *cogito* is to be repudiated as the agency of manipulative domination responsible for all present woes, from patriarchal oppression to ecological catastrophes. The specter of the “Cartesian paradigm” roams around, simultaneously proclaimed dead and feared as the ultimate threat to our survival. In clear contrast to this predominant *doxa*, Lacan pleads for a psychoanalytic *return to cogito*.

Today’s predominant position involves the assertion of multiple subjectivities against the specter of (transcendental) Subject: the unified Subject, the topic of transcendental philosophy, the constitutive source of all reality, is dead (or so we are told), and the void of its absence is filled in by the liberating proliferation of the multiple forms of subjectivity—feminine, gay, ethnic. . . . One should thus abandon the impossible search for the Subject that is constitutive of reality, and, instead,

focus attention on the diverse forms of asserting one's subjectivity in our complex and dispersed postmodern universe. . . . What, however, if we perform the exact opposite of this standard operation, and endeavor to think *a subject bereft of subjectivity* (of the self-experience of a historical agent embedded in a finite horizon of meaning)? What kind of monster remains when we subtract from the subject the wealth of self-experience that constitutes subjectivity? The present volume provides an answer to this question: its underlying premise is that the Cartesian subject *is* this monster, that it emerges precisely when we deprive the subject of all the wealth of the "human person."

Following Lacan's path, this second volume of the SIC series sets out to explore the vicissitudes of the *cogito*. Part 1 (*Cogito as a Freudian Concept*) provides the basics: in his introductory essay, Mladen Dolar explains in detail why, for Lacan, the subject of the unconscious is none other than the Cartesian *cogito*, while Alenka Zupančič, in her reading of Kant, delineates the contours of the ethical attitude that befits the notion of modern subjectivity. Finally, through an analysis of the "larger-than-life" figures in the work of Orson Welles and Ayn Rand, Slavoj Žižek elaborates the four elementary modes of modern subjectivity, as well as their inherent sexualization. Part 2 (*Cogito's Body*) focuses on Nicolas Malebranche, the Cartesian philosopher and theologian who, with an unheard-of-audacity, tackled the deadlocks in which the Cartesian project gets involved apropos of the enigmatic status of the human body (Alain Grosrichard, Miran Božovič). Is the monster with a phallic protuberance above his one eye, analyzed by Grosrichard, not a kind of obscene double of the Cartesian *cogito*, its impossible spectral embodiment? In the concluding essay of this part, Renata Salecl tackles the lethal *jouissance* of the siren's voice. The three essays in part 3 (*Cogito and Its Critics*) deal with three paradigmatic contemporary critiques of the Cartesian subjectivity: Bataille's assertion of the excessive expenditure that allegedly undermines *cogito's* restrained economy (Marc de Kessel), the Althusserian notion of subject as the effect of ideological interpellation (Robert Pfaller), and Daniel Dennett's dismissal of the Cartesian Theatre from the perspective of cognitive science (Slavoj Žižek).

## Notes

- 1 As it was emphasized by Robert Pfaller (on whom I rely here), the notion of shibboleth enables us also to define in a precise way, the paradoxical relationship between science and ideology: ideology does not exclude science; rather, it endeavors to *integrate* it into its field, like “clinching” to the opponent in a boxing match instead of directly fighting him. The point is thus that the difference ideology/science is visible only from one side, from the side of science. A further example of ideological shibboleth is provided by the way in which dominant (“high”) culture relates to counterculture. When members of counterculture are gnawed by the fear of being “integrated” into or “co-opted” by the official high culture, thus losing their subversive sting, they thereby commit a grave theoretical mistake: the line of separation that divides high culture from counterculture is visible only from the side of the counterculture, which is why high culture is as a rule “open,” its members always want to “talk,” to establish a common field of activity. . . . In theology, the exemplary case of the logic of shibboleth is offered by the Jansenist notion of miracle, which also relies on a paradoxical “nonsymmetrical visibility”: for the Jansenists, a miracle does not occur at the direct, “vulgar” material level, as a proof of the faith for all to see. For those who do not believe, the miraculous event is part of the simple continuity of the natural course of things—a miracle can be recognized as such only by those who (already) believe.
- 2 See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), 300.
- 3 For a more detailed account of this excess, see, in the present volume, Slavoj Žižek, “The Cartesian Subject versus the Cartesian Theater.”

PART I

**cogito  
as a  
freudian  
concept**



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Mladen Dolar

1

**Cogito as the  
Subject of the  
Unconscious**

In the opening paragraph of one of the earliest pieces in his *Écrits*, the famous paper entitled “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience” (1949, presented in Zürich at the International Congress of Psychoanalysis), Lacan situates his notion of the mirror stage in the following way: “The conception of the mirror stage that I introduced at our last congress, thirteen years ago [that was the congress in Marienbad in 1936, the last one where Freud was present as well], has since become more or less established in the practice of the French group. However, I think it worthwhile to bring it again to your attention, especially today, for the light it sheds on the formation of the *I* as we experience it in psychoanalysis. It is an experience that leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*” (Lacan 1977, 1; 1966, 93). So in the very first paragraph of the first notorious *écrit*, there is a clear alternative, an emphatic choice that one has to assume: *either the mirror phase or the cogito*. One has to decide one way or the other between psychoanalysis and philosophy, which has, in the past three centuries, largely issued from cogito, despite its variety of forms and despite its often proposed criticism of cogito. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, if properly understood and practiced, promises to offer a way out of the “age of cogito.” The alternative that Lacan has in mind, in this particular strategically situated spot, is the following: the mirror stage, insofar as it is indeed formative of the function of the I, demonstrates that the I, the ego, is a place of an imaginary blinding, a deception; far

from being the salutary part of the mind that could serve as a firm support of the psychoanalytic cure, against the vagaries of the id and the superego (such was the argument of ego-psychology), rather, it is itself the source of paranoia, and of all kinds of fantasy formations. If such is the nature of the I, then it must be most sharply opposed to cogito, with its inherent pretension to self-transparency and self-certainty.<sup>1</sup>

But even apart from Lacan's particular theory of the mirror stage, with all its ramifications, the dilemma seems to pertain to psychoanalysis as such, to its "basic insight." For is the discovery of the unconscious not in itself inherently an attack on the very idea of cogito? The self-transparent subjectivity that figures as the foundation of modern philosophy—even in those parts of it that were critical of cogito—seems to be submitted to a decisive blow with the advent of psychoanalysis. Cogito must be seen not only at odds with, but at the opposite end in relation to the unconscious. Such was Freud's own implicit self-understanding (although he didn't deal at any length with Descartes, except for his curious short paper on Descartes's dream, "Über einen Traum des Cartesius," [Freud 1929b]), and this is the spontaneous, seemingly self-evident, and widespread conception of that relation. This view can then be considered alongside other contemporary radical attempts to dismantle cogito, most notably with Heidegger, who was also during that period Lacan's source of inspiration. So both the analysis of the ego and that of the unconscious, although running in different directions, appear to undermine the very idea of cogito.

Yet, Lacan's position in that respect has undergone a far-reaching change. First of all, a clear distinction had to be made, in his further development, between the "I," the ego, on one hand, and the subject on the other. The "I" is not the subject, and the mechanism discovered in the mirror stage, the blinding, the recognition that is intrinsically misrecognition, while defining the function of the "I," doesn't apply at all to the function of the subject. If the first one is to be put under the heading of the Imaginary, the second follows an entirely different logic, that of the Symbolic. In this division, cogito, surprisingly for many, figures on the side of the subject.

Lacan's perseverance toward retaining the concept of the subject certainly ran against the grain of the time, especially in the days of a budding and flowering structuralism that seemed to have done away with



the subject, inflicting upon it a final mortal blow after its protracted moribund status. The general strategy promoted by structuralism could, in a very simplified manner, be outlined as an attempt to put forward the level of a “nonsubjective” structure as opposed to the subject’s self-apprehension. There is a nonsubjective “symbolic” dimension of which the subject is but an effect, an epiphenomenon, and which is necessarily overlooked in the subject’s imaginary self-understanding. This basic approach could be realized in a number of different ways: Lévi-Strauss’s structure as the matrix of permutations of differential elements regulating mythologies, rituals, beliefs, habits, etcetera, behind the subjects’ backs; Foucault’s *episteme*, “anonymous” discursive formations and strategies, or later the dispositions of power, etcetera; Althusser’s “process without a subject” that science has to unearth behind the ideological interpellation that constitutes subjectivity; Derrida’s notion of writing, or *la différance*, as “prior” to any split into subject/object, interior/exterior, space/time, etcetera; Kristeva’s opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic. In spite of great differences between those attempts and their sometimes sharply opposed results, there was a common tendency to conceive of a dimension “behind” or “underneath” or “anterior to” the subject, the very notion of the subject thereby falling into a kind of disrepute and becoming synonymous with “self-deception,” a necessary illusion, an essential blinding as to the conditions that produced it. The structuralist revolution has thus seen itself as a break away from the humanist tradition centered on the subject (cf. Foucault’s ponderous reference to the “death of man”), and particularly as a radical rupture with the philosophical tradition based on cogito.

Lacan’s view sharply differed from this model by firmly clinging to the notion of the subject and “rescuing” it all along. His talk about *the subject of the unconscious* was certain to provoke some astonishment.<sup>2</sup> He saw the unconscious, along structuralist lines, as a structure—“structured as a language,” as the famous slogan goes—discovering in it the Saussurean and Jakobsonian operations of metaphor and metonymy, etcetera, but as a *structure with a subject*, a subject conceived as opposed to the consciousness and the “I.” So for Lacan, on whatever level we look at matters, *there is no process, and no structure, without a subject*. The supposedly “nonsubjective” process overlooked in the constitution of subjectivity, was for Lacan essentially always already “subjectivized,”

although the subject it implied was a very different entity from the one that the structuralist strategy strove to dismantle. Retaining the concept was for him far more subversive in its effects than simply dismissing it.

In the next step, he went even further with the baffling suggestion that cogito *was* the subject of the unconscious, thus turning against some basic assumptions (shall one say prejudices?) of that period. It was a suggestion that has baffled Lacan's opponents and followers alike. Lacan largely defined his project with the slogan announcing a "return to Freud," but subsequently it turned out that this slogan had to be complemented with a corollary: the return to Freud had to pass by way of a return to Descartes. So there is a huge gap that separates Lacan from the rest of the structuralist generation, which defined itself as basically anti-Cartesian (and also as anti-Hegelian, but that is another story), regardless of many differences between the proposed theories, whereas Lacan saw himself rather as an heir to that tradition. This divide ultimately depends on the different ways of grasping subjectivity.

At the simplest level, one can approach this divide with the notion of recognition, which was largely seen as the necessary and sufficient condition of subjectivity, turning it thus necessarily into an imaginary or "ideological" notion that one has to be rid of. For Lacan, however, *the subject emerges only at the point of a nonrecognition*: all formations of the unconscious have this in common, they are accompanied by a "this is not me," "I was not there," although they were produced by the subject him/herself (or to put it in the terms of cogito: they cannot be followed by a "therefore I am"). They depend on the emergence of an "alien kernel" within subjectivity, an automatism beyond control, a "discourse of the Other," the breakdown, in certain points, of the constituted horizon of recognition and sense. This nonintegration is constitutive for the subject, although it may appear as its limit, reduction, or failure. So Lacan's criticism of the "I," the illusion of autonomous and self-transparent subjectivity, was well embedded in the general structuralist strategy, but the fact that he nevertheless stubbornly espoused the concept of the subject was the mark of his far-reaching dissent and opposition.

How can the subject of the unconscious be possibly conceived of as cogito? How to conceive of cogito after the advent of psychoanalysis? Is there a Freudian cogito? The question should perhaps be reversed: *is there an unconscious outside of cogito?* Lacan's wager is that there is not.

Hence his insistence that the subject that psychoanalysis has to deal with is none other than the subject of modern science, thoroughly dependent on cogito.<sup>3</sup> The Freudian unconscious is the unconscious of cogito, in both senses of the genitive. There is, however, a subplot in this story, for if the subject of psychoanalysis is that of science as well, its object is not. The object that psychoanalysis has to deal with by definition eludes science, it cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny, it is the evasive singular object that provides *jouissance*. So the tricky problem that the two Lacanian accounts of cogito will attempt to solve is also the following: how does the subject of the unconscious, as cogito, relate to *jouissance*?

One can start with a simple observation about Descartes's own procedure in the *Meditations*, the procedure of a "methodical doubt," which can be seen as a gradual reduction of consciousness, its "evacuation." Consciousness must lose any worldly support, it must be cleansed of any objective counterpart—and the recognition/miscognition, in relation to the object opposed to it, is precisely what defines the meanderings of the Imaginary, which the mirror stage has dealt with at their core. It must also eliminate the support in the signifier, any received truths and certainties, the seemingly evident mathematical laws, etcetera. What eventually remains, is a pure vanishing point without a counterpart, which can only be sustained in a minimal gesture of enunciation. It is questionable whether this yields the subject of thought—Descartes himself considered alternative suggestions of "I doubt, I err, I lie," etcetera, *ergo sum*, the minimal form of which is "I enounce, *ergo sum*." One has to entrust oneself to the signifier, yet the subject that is at stake has no signifier of its own, it is the subject of enunciation, absent from and underlying what is enunciated: "Note in passing that in avoiding the *I think*, I avoid the discussion that results from the fact that this *I think*, for us, certainly cannot be detached from the fact that he can formulate it only by *saying* it to us, implicitly—a fact that [Descartes] forgets" (Lacan 1986, 36). What remains is purely an empty spot occupied by the subject of enunciation. For being empty, it can be universal, and it can indeed be seen as the form of subjectivity implied by science, a merely formal subjectivity purified of all content and substance. Each proposition of science must display the ability to be posited universally, that is, in such a way that it can be assumed by the empty form of subjectivity epitomized by cogito.

To be sure, this view already departs from Descartes. People as di-

vergent in thought as Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and Lacan all agree that Descartes's "error," if it can be so called, consists in substantializing this empty spot of cogito by turning it into *res cogitans*. Cogito marks a "non-place," a gap, a chasm in the chain of being, it doesn't delineate a certain sphere of being to be placed alongside other spheres, it cannot be situated in some part of reality, yet it is at the same time correlative to reality as such.<sup>4</sup>

Lacan's starting point in this reading of cogito is the assumption that cogito implies, in its pure and minimal form, a non-imaginary subject as a void. This is immediately followed by a tour de force: the coupling of this empty spot with the lack implied by the Symbolic that has been produced in other ways. Lacan has spent much time demonstrating that this second lack can ultimately be deduced from Saussure's algorithm of the signifier and its underlying logic. In a nutshell, it follows from the basic property of the signifier that it can never be counted for one; "one" signifier already counts for two, because the empty place of its absence also counts. Differentiability, the Saussurean definition of the signifier has to be extended to the point where the signifier differs from itself: ultimately, it is the difference between itself and the void of its absence. Once we find ourselves in the realm of the Symbolic, there is never a simple absence or an innocent lack, and this invisible "missing half" that inherently sticks to the signifier is for Lacan precisely the place to which the subject can be "pinned" (hence the notion of *suture*). At a later stage, Lacan extensively uses some devices of set theory (as we shall see), which, in the most rudimentary form, implies (and formalizes) the difference between the set and the element it contains. The empty set, in this entirely formal view, is precisely the place of the subject. Its emptiness and its purely formal character have been designated by Lacan, in his algebra, by the signum  $\S$ , to be read as *sujet barré*, the barred subject—there is quite literally a bar crossing its S, it is what remains when any S, with any positive feature, has been "crossed over," erased. Nothing remains, but this nothing counts.

To be sure, again, this view can hardly be seen as Cartesian, for Descartes, having produced this vanishing point, didn't allow it to vanish. Quite the opposite, his whole problem was how to proceed from there, and it turned out that this point could only be sustained by being pinned to the Other, the big Other epitomized by God: "When Descartes intro-

duces the concept of a certainty that holds entirely in the *I think* of cogitation . . . one might say that his mistake is to believe that this is knowledge. To say that he knows something of this certainty. Not to make of the *I think* a mere point of fading. . . . He puts the field of this knowledge at the level of this vaster subject, the subject who is supposed to know, God” (Lacan 1986, 224). So the barred subject needs the guarantee of the Other if there is to be any following step, the emergence of any knowledge, and in this way, by this support, it can be rid of its bar. This thesis encroaches upon a notorious controversy concerning the question of whether Descartes has committed a *circulus in demonstrando*, a vicious circle in his argument. The debate started already with the objections to the *Meditations*, and in his response, Descartes had to defend himself against the criticism about *la faute qu'on appelle le cercle*. The debate has a long history and I cannot venture into this difficult matter here. For our present purpose it suffices to say that according to Lacan, Descartes did indeed commit such a fallacy.<sup>5</sup>

The implication of this reading is that the existence of cogito as such cannot be sustained—at least not without reverting to the support of the big Other, the figure of God, the intimidating subject supposed to know. If the cogito is indeed just a pure vanishing point of the subject of enunciation, then its existence doesn't follow from it. It cannot assume an *ergo sum*. All consistence it has is pinned to a signifier—there is no \$ without a signifier—but only as a void that sticks to it and cannot be presentified as such. In order to see what this means and how this works, one has to consider the mechanism of alienation, itself a necessary effect of language.

Alienation was for Lacan always essentially connected with the idea of a forced choice, although the terms of this choice and its implications varied at different stages of his teaching. The subject is subject to a choice—this is what makes it a subject in the first place—but this choice is rather the opposite of the free and autonomous choice one is accustomed to associate with the subject. One could say that the very elementary device of psychoanalysis, free associations, spectacularly stages this paradox: one is supposed to freely say anything that passes through one's mind, autonomously choosing whatever one wants, yet the moment one begins, it becomes clear that one is trapped; every free choice, in free associations, turns out to have been a forced one.

There is a mechanism at the bottom of forced choice that Lacan attempts to delineate: the subject can choose only one way, and furthermore, by choosing s/he meets with a loss. This doesn't mean simply that by choosing one side one loses the other, but also that even the side one has chosen is ridden with a loss—one can only get it curtailed, cut off from its part, so that the choice requires a double loss. Lacan has demonstrated this by the famous situation of a *vel*, epitomized by the somewhat drastic example of “your money or your life,” *la bourse ou la vie*. The two sides of the choice are not symmetrical: I can only choose to cling to my life, thus losing the money, while clinging to money would entail losing both, the life and the money. The choice is decided in advance, there is no freedom of choice, and the chosen element can only be retained as curtailed, *écorné* (the life minus the money), or else one would lose both.

Here is the next tour de force in Lacan's reading of cogito: there is a way in which cogito has the same structure, it can be taken as a case of “your money or your life.” This is the scene of the Lacanian cogito: one is pushed against the wall, the gun pointing at one's head, with an unfathomable voice crying out in the dark: “Your thought or your being! Make up your mind!” One can appreciate the irony of the situation, for the moment one stops to think it over, the choice is already decided, one has lost one's being by thinking. And one can only hold on to being if one doesn't stop to think, but stops thinking.

In 1964, in the seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, generally taken as Lacan's “standard account” of cogito, Lacan proposes the cogito as a forced choice between *cogito* and *sum*. There is an alternative: *either to think or to be*, and since there is no freedom of choice, one can only choose one way—but which one? One could assume that, following the model of “your money or your life,” one is supposed to cling to one's being at the price of losing thought, but Lacan surprisingly sees the situation in the opposite way: one must choose thought, the thought that makes sense, curtailed of being. More paradoxically still, as we shall see, some years later Lacan espoused the opposite view, that one is forced to opt for being at the expense of thought, eventually yielding a quite different account of cogito.

If I choose *I think*, I lose my being by entrusting myself head over heels to the tricky logic of the signifier. This is the choice that Descartes proposes, making the being of the subject dependent on thought

and deducible from it. But Lacan's point, in this forced choice, is that *sum* doesn't follow once one has made the first step. Thought depends on the signifier, which turns the subject into the empty point of enunciation, instead of founding his/her being. In the place of the supposed certainty of the subject's being, there is just a void. *It is not the same subject that thinks and that is*; the one *that is* is not the one *that thinks*, even more, the one *that is* is ultimately not a subject at all. One should already mark here that should one choose being, one would have to espouse the object, precisely the object that Lacan has labeled *objet a*, the object that detains being, but a being over which one cannot be master. Choosing being would entail desubjectivation, one would have to give up the status of the subject altogether. But apart from that, from Descartes's own point of view choosing being would be void, it would thrust the subject back into the vagaries of the Imaginary, a confusion without hope for foundation and consistency, the black hole of being outside rationality, briefly, a non-being.

Since the choice of being is an impossible choice, coinciding with the non-being of the subject, one is bound to choose thought insofar as it makes sense (but there is a thought that doesn't, and this will emerge as the unconscious). And although one can make sense only by adopting signifiers, this seals the subject's fate, for s/he becomes merely what "a signifier represents for another signifier," thus essentially chained to it, while gliding along the signifying chain.<sup>6</sup> This is the point of the little scheme that one finds in the English translation (figure 1): "If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-sense. If we choose sense, the sense survives only deprived of that part of non-sense that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious. In other words, it is of the nature of this sense, as it emerges in the field of the Other, to be in a large part of its field, eclipsed by the disappearance of being, induced by the very function of the signifier" (Lacan 1986, 211; translation modified). There is a choice between being and sense, where one is forced to wind up with sense, but a sense that is necessarily curtailed, cut off from its part, the part of non-sense, and this is precisely the part where one has to place the unconscious. The unconscious is to be situated at the intersection, the lost intersection of being and sense, whereas the part of being, as an impossible choice, is an empty set. It is in the place of the loss—the loss of

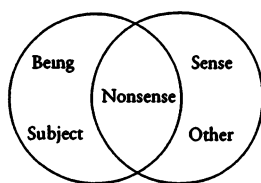


Figure 1

being—in this empty set, that the subject is located. The subject’s place is the formal empty set of an impossible choice—for the forced choice is not simply an absence of choice: choice is offered and denied at the same time, but its empty alternative is what counts for the subject. The implication can also be read as follows: one cannot choose oneself as a subject, one can only remain a subject by holding on to something else, a positive element of sense, which, paradoxically, entails *aphanisis*, that is, the disappearance of the subject—but this oscillation between sense and *aphanisis* precisely constitutes the subject: “Alienation consists in this *vel*, which . . . condemns the subject to appearing only in that division . . . , if it appears on one side as sense, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as *aphanisis*” (Lacan 1986, 210; translation modified). In this scheme Lacan inscribes the subject, superimposed at the void place of being, and the Other, superimposed on sense. The sense one chooses is necessarily entrusted to the Other, it is only by subscribing to the signifiers that are at a disposal in the Other—as the reservoir of signifiers—that one can “make sense” at all.

Perhaps things can be made clearer if we introduce Lacan’s later notation, which he developed in the following years in an attempt to be as economical and as clear as possible (figure 2). (Maybe the difficulty in understanding Lacan stems largely from his attempts to be simple, to clarify matters to the utmost.) One necessarily chooses  $S_2$ , the signifier of sense and knowledge, which schematically condenses and represents the entire chain of signifiers. But that choice exacts its revenge: we are cut off from an essential signifier, marked by  $S_1$ , the signifier without a signified, a senseless signifier, which reemerges as the incomprehensible, nonsensical message of the unconscious—“this is not me,” “I was not there.”

We can consider separately the left circle and the right circle of this scheme. On the left side, we have  $\$ / S_1$ , which can actually be seen as an interpretation of the slogan “cogito as the subject of the unconscious.”



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