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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 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.¹

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 psychoanalysis, 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:² 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 paralogism: 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.³

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.”