

Why/How Does Anything Have an Unconscious?

Lacan struggles, in the period between 1950 and 1960, to relocate the subject, away from the Structuralist function as a locus within a network and, at the same time, from the psychoanalytic idea of the patient-analysand as such. Yet, he wishes to preserve the key subjective function discovered by the Structuralists, the relation to symbolic systems, and preserve the clinical context that, if Freud is read correctly, realize that the clinic can also be a theater of symptoms, a kind of memory theater in the Sixteenth Century tradition, where signs lead to illumination that is beyond enunciation.

Lacan resorts to metaphors of negativity to describe how the subject is the subject of the language that is both the basis of, but incapable of articulating the nature of, the unconscious. He suggests the model of a sequence of random coin-tosses. Like conscious experience, this suggests a temporal sequence that, like the contingencies of everyday experience, cannot be completely predicted but can be described. The sequence would be tuned to culture, technology, personal outlook, social roles — this is the point, to say that *however the subject finds itself disposed, the same contingency is the stuff of conscious experience*.

Within this simplified mathematical model of the coin-toss, Lacan notes that there are underlying conditions of adjacency. Using 1 for heads and 0 for tails, there can be four cases: 00, 10, 01, 11. If the first is indicated by the number 1, the second and third by 2, and the fourth by 3, a sequence of 01110100110101110 would give the following situations of adjacency:

01 11 11 10 01 10 00 01 11 10 01 10 01 11 11 10, or

2 3 3 2 2 2 1 2 3 2 2 2 3 3 2.

Even though the generating sequence is random, there are rules that determine the order of this derivative sequence. For example, between any two 3s, there must be an even number of 2s. It is this kind of orderliness that, Lacan argues, creates a *grammar* of the unconscious, a grammar that makes itself present in conscious speech as error or ungrammaticality. There are “ungrammatical” instances, such as slips of the tongue or spoonerisms, such as Freud’s famous example of the “famillionnaire” — the rich fellow who turns out to be quite chummy. There are also grammatical cases, such as the “ne” in French, which is a way of language saying what it does not quite mean to say.

The subject in Lacan’s system is not the ego-based personality who participates, with a name and full identity papers, in the symbolic networks of everyday life, fully dressed and identified by name, rank, and social role. The subject is, rather, the subject of the unconscious and, hence, the subject that is ungrammatical in everyday terms: “barred” because, in relation to the Other, it is always misrepresented. When the subject of the unconscious speaks, it forfeits

its being. That is to say, the subject can be present as a potentiality, but once this potentiality is put forward as an ungrammatical instance, the subject must vanish. It is an either/or situation.

Lacan notes how this happens within a set of four fundamental conditions, known as the four discourses: the Master-Servant, hysteria, the university, and (psycho-)analysis. Interestingly, these indicate that Lacan finds a way to set up a kind of scientific experiment in a way that is very similar to the laboratory procedure of cell culturing in Petri dishes, where a small group of cells is placed on a nutritional medium and allowed to grow. The medium, so to speak, is based on a historical precedent. The case of the Master-Servant is taken from Hegel, who generalizes the emergence of what could be generally called the "hero" as one willing to risk his life for his reputation. The early-Modern context of Hegel's *Phenomenology* might make us think that Hegel is talking about contemporary aristocracy, but the life-and-death basis for respect make it equally applicable to the case of Homer's *Illiad*, where cities war against cities on points of honor, and *The Odyssey*, where the hero requires skills of self-reflection to move away from the hero model that requires him to sacrifice life for honor.

Lacan's identification of four iconic "positions" set within a fixed sequence ($\$, S_1, S_2, a$), standing (very roughly speaking) for the barred subject, the master or master signifier, knowledge, and the object-cause of desire, seems at first arbitrary. That they throw us into history in a fairly unrepresentative scatter of locations seems to force one of two conclusions. Either, first, the historicity of the master, the university, the hysteric, and analysis is subordinate to the logical relationship these elements have in Lacan's theory, or, second, these elements can be found in such a variety of conditions and forms that they are more widespread than we might first expect. Just as Hegel's master could be the Count of Monte Cristo or Agammemnon, we know for certain that there were hysterics before Dora showed up in Freud's clinic in 1900.

Still, there is a historicity in this seemingly arbitrary set of empirical situations that makes us look for deeper patterns. Giambattista Vico, for example, famously identified the "Age of Heroes" as the second of his canonical series of three ages common to all cultures (gods, heroes, men). The University discourse, furthermore, seems to be something possible only at the point where heroes have converted to men, capable of lying in order to avoid death. Hysteria, too, is notoriously historical, arising as a symptom not just because science has become aware of it, but intensifying with cultural shifts from early-Modern to Modernity, a period where women in particular were relocated within symbolic networks dominated by the idea of capitalism and democracy.

The point is not to look for historical correspondences to consider the pros and cons but, rather, to reflect on what Lacan's investment of the subject's "fixed" condition within history's constantly changing conditions actually means. One way of looking at this is to compare it to

Vico's parallel investment. His major work, *The New Science*, was based on insights gained in earlier works: that language itself revealed an "unconscious" that manifested itself in history. The etymology of words showed how, in speaking, speakers were saying more than they knew about metaphysical matters. This cross-over was epitomized, itself, by the etymology of *factum*, which showed how truth was bound up with creation, yielding Vico's most famous dictum, *verum ipsum factum*, that humans in principle may know perfectly what they have made. The "in principle" caveat functions as Vico's model for the unconscious. In everyday experience, it's the ignorance of this truth that makes culture what it is. The made, the *factum*, appears to be natural, arising from evident needs and formed by obvious limitations and preferences.

The point is for *factum* to face forward, into the contingency of the everyday, while concealing all the while, a *verum*, which works as an *automaton* within any sequence of experiences, utterances, or creations. The automaton can be understood in several ways. First, as in the heads-tails sequence example, it can be seen as an artifact of a stochastic process, a built-in though hard-to-detect grammar that converts randomness into pattern. A second approach involves an analogy to C. S. Peirce's sequence of index, icon, and symbol. Where the index has a direct and usually causal relationship to its referent (smoke to fire), the icon develops an independence. The shadow, connected to its referent through the rules of the projection of light, can be clipped off as a graphic silhouette and used to represent its absent owner. (This is the classic story of the origin of painting; Dibutades records her lover's shadow on a wall, to preserve his memory as he departs for war.) The theme of the tricky shadow liberated from its owner is a folklore mainstay, carried into modernity by the fictional device of the character who declares independence from the author, or even in the device of the defective narrator, invented to allow the reader to see past the limits of a chosen point of view.

Automaton in these terms shows how both the idea of "automatic conversion" and "independence" belong to the same function. Like Peirce's index, automatic conversion is directly tied to its source; but, as in the example from Lacan, this conversion is unexpected and seems to range far beyond the contingent starting point. In a similar argument made by the physicist Stephen Wolfram, a set of axioms or primary conditions of adjacency can give rise to stable patterns. Wolfram argues that, given enough generative steps, any random sequence will *always* result in a pattern that is not only ordered but symmetrical at all levels, i.e. a fractal. From contingency to rule is also Vico's model: that no matter where culture finds itself, it will run through three invariant stages of development; and no matter where an individual finds him/herself in this system, they will, on the molecular level, experience the same stages of mental development.

Thus, Vico, Lacan, Hegel, and others make the claim that subjectivity is both a matter of the inner world of the individual psyche and the outer world of radical contingency — different climates, different levels of technology, different historical influences. The most *interesting*

thing about these claims is that they all to one degree or another subscribe to a model of the automaton; and that this automaton yields results that can be compared to mathematical fractals. Because the unconscious relates to both individual (molecular) and cultural (molar) development, the question becomes one of how much the automaton as a *theme* in art and literature runs parallel to these philosophical-psychoanalytic claims.