

Predication “Both Ways”

In philosophy, borrowing from grammar, a predicate is a quality, something that defines a subject. Esperanza may be beautiful, petulant, remarkable, careless, etc. All these qualities belong to Esperanza. But, suppose that one quality has a secret sway. What if Esperanza’s weakness is her envy, and that envy leads her to take some risk or commit some crime? Then, the predicate becomes something akin to the “deadly sins” of Catholic tradition (wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony). After all, why are these common human failings regarded as *deadly* sins? The answer has to do with predication — how quickly qualities or habits that are a *part* of life can come to *dominate* life. A predicate can “flip” from being a quality *of* someone or some thing to being a controlling feature — a feature that sets up a dramatic sequence of events — a “fate” — that pull the previous “owner” of the quality toward a determined destiny.

The Master Signifier

In Stephen Spielberg’s 1975 thriller, *Jaws*, the shark works as a “master signifier.” This bit of Lacanian terminology means that some element which is a predicate can become a *predicator*, a term that organizes other terms, while still functioning as a part of a whole. The shark is at first seen as a symptom — of nature being pushed to the limit, of businessmen wanting to exploit the commercial value of the beach, of teenagers wanting to have sex in the water. But, at the point where the shark eludes all attempts to “settle” his shark-ness within some pre-existing matrix of explanation — Deleuze calls this the “demark,” the resistance of a term to sit quietly within a system — the shark moves to the center of things. It is not a known quantity, so to speak, but rather it occupies the center as a kind of void that unsettles attempts to know or control it.

The shark has performed, or been the element of, what Jacques Lacan would call “extimacy.” It has moved from being an element contained within a stable system of meanings to being a *container*. The shark has, thanks to the topology of this situation, done what ideology does. It has moved from a subordinate, exteriorized location to a central position, where it has converted the center into a void.

The void, in turn, though radically central, is a new externality. The subject who is the site of this centrality is alienated, from within. The subject is, paradoxically, “on the outside looking in” and “the inside looking out” at the same time. In ideology, this is the concept that, for ideology to work, all subjects must be symbolically castrated, i.e. alienated as a *result of belonging to the system*. In terms of the perceptual reality of the everyday, however, this situation describes how we see the world (“standing on the inside of subjectivity as a standardized point of view, POV”); how we “look out” although technically speaking we are looking in from our radically alienated position outside our “inside frame.” What do we see? Because we have the illusion that we are looking out while in fact we are looking in, but looking in to a *radical externality* that has, through extimacy, topologically hopped from outside to inside, we see “subjectivized objects,” objects with subjective capabilities, such as touch, intentionality, desire, thoughts, ears, etc. — but especially *an eye* that returns our gaze and interrogates us from an indeterminate position “out there.”

This is the official “Lacanian gaze,” anthropologically related to the widespread phenomenon of the “evil eye” of generic envy. We should not overlook how this common theme of folklore has also been the basis of Law, especially law concerning the distribution of goods, rights to property, relation of wealth to land and resources, etc. The principle of “usufruct” (you are allowed to use something as long as you don’t abuse it) lies close to the heart of law’s collective philosophy of social relations. This principle is materialized by the eye of someone who does not have what you have, someone who may *take away* some of your good luck or (excess) personal wealth.

The gaze of the object-world has been misunderstood, especially by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who always imagined the gaze as belonging to the subject who employed it to overpower others. Naturally, this became the chief mechanism by which feminists damaged their case by over-investing in the “male gaze” as a controlling social phenomenon. They were both right and wrong: wrong to attribute this gaze to men as different kinds of perceivers, determined by the nature of gender to always dominate and see at the same time; right to

understand the function of visibility *as such* as involving a power/legal relation that was implicitly a function of gendering. In short, some feminists (Laura Mulvey) did not go far enough to “think through” the full range of the logic of predication. The few who did discovered some remarkable connections, as in the case of Gennie Lemoines’ and Nicole Loraux’s theses on the relation of sexuation to social structure in ancient Greece.¹

Predication as a Flip

We would not be speaking “out of the ordinary” to say that, when a painter picks up her palette that there are paints on it, not the “real objects” these paints will soon be applied to represent. The paints are assembled, and the shapes, reflections, undertones, and shadings that compel our eyes to see a cup sitting on a table take shape. In the phrase “take shape” there is both the idea that a cup takes shape and that the arrangement of paints that brings this shape about “take shape.” The artist, after all, went to art school to learn how to shape the paints as well as to look at the world in terms of the shape-making that comes about by means of a brush, pigments, and canvas.

In other words, we have already been using the idea of “flipped predication” — and, hence, extimacy, for quite some time. We simply have not admitted, or come to realize, its more radical consequences. For example, it is difficult to bring ourselves to the point of saying out the external world, which seems undeniably solid and permanent, comes about as a result of our alienation by ideology. The *statement* is bizarre, but the situation is commonplace. (This is why we make such statements only in the company of those who know what we are talking about.)

So, why make bizarre statements at all? Only by forcing ourselves to realize the hidden consequences of everyday conditions do we gain access to the fuller range of relationships where one aspect of human experience touches on, and determines, others. For example, the subjective objectivity of the evil eye, which converts envy into a legal force, means that we “see legality immediately” in the world. Just looking at the landscape automatically involves ideas about limits, excess, proper use, and systems of social regulation. We see the idea of sustainability “immediately”; we do not deduce it abstractly from long thought and contemplation.

The radical alienation of ideology and its relation to perception, to bring up another set of examples, relates directly to what Heidegger built into his idea of *Dasein* — “being *there*.” The subject is not happy in a world where he/she masters things through technology; no matter how much mastery a subject may have, there is always an unsettling *unheimlich* quality to human life. With the template of ideology’s extimacy, we can directly approach this uncanniness.

As for the uncanny itself, extimacy is by its nature uncanny, and the uncanny involves two important forms of extimacy: the extimacy of “detached virtuality” (cases: a shadow escapes its owner and begins to act on its own; a character escapes from its author, as in the novel *Chromos* by Filipe Alfau); and the extimacy of “attached virtuality” (cases: the contamination of waking life by a dream; the sudden appearance of a man from outer space who warns earth’s inhabitants that they will be destroyed if they do not reform — the plot of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*). The uncanny leads us to a broad range of cultural practices, where “the in-between” is a ruling force. The two virtualities that involve “illegal” exchanges between visibility and invisibility tell us a lot about literature, painting, and the other arts that exploit them more easily than does architecture.

In sum, the subject of “flip predication” and master signification open a lot of doors connecting subjects in a great variety of areas. They are like a “Rosetta stone,” a single clearing-house for connections and relationships. Master the idea, internalize it by finding your own examples, and you will gain access to these connections and relationships.

¹ See Nicole Loraux, *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993).