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Between Truth and Relativism: the Choice of Psychoanalysis

My aim is to draw your attention to the position of psychoanalysis regarding the opposition between the quest for truth and relativism, which is a conventional opposition of contemporary thought.

I will do this by means of Lacanian teachings. It is my intention to take up the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis and the consequences of clinical facts in order to arrive at a critical consideration of this topic.

Before proceeding to the exact argument, I will briefly review the historical ground correlated to modern subjectivity, characterized by the vanishing of the guarantee of both truth and knowledge.

Then I will go into the topic by means of a survey of Lacan's reading of the path of modern logic. Lacan had a peculiar interest in logic, and his interpretation of the whole history of logic transforms the achievements of modern logical thought into the writings of a *point de capiton* for collective rationality.

The key here is to focus on the capital role of what is called in the conclusion *the supposition of the inaccessible* for both individual and collective life. This is the issue I will address in the last point.

My paper is divided into five parts: 1. The relativistic drift; 2. The guarantee of knowledge; 3. The guarantee of truth; 4. Logic and the *point de capiton*; and 5. The signification (*Bedeutung*) of the phallus.

Relativism is a key word of our era. It is a *leitmotiv* at several levels of social and cultural life. It is an implicit condition of living together in a non-dogmatic democracy and world; a condition of the cohabitation of various kinds of knowledge.

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Simply, we could say that relativism claims that no knowledge holds the truth, rather each type is a construction. Relativism can be considered the position which rejects any absolute principle. It shows that every knowledge is based on a set of beliefs; this is its disenchanting value. On the other hand, relativism is a discursive device, unfolding in a spiral, going through unfathomable layers of both collective and individual identity structures. This results in an endless drift that reduces each position to nothing but an opinion. The effect is a bewilderment that captures the pragmatic man, who is molded into a relativistic *humus*.

For its part, psychoanalysis arises from a question of truth. As Lacan stated, “truth is inscribed in the very heart of analytic practice.”¹ Truth is the engine of its therapeutic effectiveness. The historical moment in which psychoanalysis arose was when scientific knowledge abandoned any claim to truth and religious authority declined. From then on, this claim was taken up by psychoanalysis as a discipline of truth, both its cause and its end. A truth that is not revealed but is a “material cause,” to cite Lacan’s definition.²

Now, to go deeper into this, Lacan places psychoanalysis in the wake of relativism. His structuralist perspective leads him to relativize customs, institutions, and laws; he endorses Pascal’s famous aphorism:

Three degrees of latitude reverse all jurisprudence; a meridian decides the truth. Fundamental laws change after a few years of possession; right has its epochs; the entry of Saturn into the Lion marks to us the origin of such and such a crime. A strange justice that is bounded by a river! Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side.³

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From this perspective, geography, history, and culture produce human identities that take shape among various possibilities which are radically different from each other. No dogma remains unchanged by crossing times and latitudes.

¹ Jacques Lacan, “The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis”, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 338.

² Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth”, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*. New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 743.

³ Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts* (1660), translated by W.F. Trotter, Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Paul Halsall, August 1998, p. 294.

At the same time, Lacan deconstructs the relativistic device in order to show that in its purest and most radical form, i.e. moral relativism, it slips on a deceptive surface, mesmerized by the air of modern times. Lacan's interpretation states that the invention of psychoanalyst is an epochal symptom, an answer to the de-subjectivizing effects of modernity. His teachings make psychoanalysis the suture thread of a *point de capiton* that stops the endless drift of relativism. The ethics of psychoanalysis and the psychoanalyst's desire converge at this point.

1. The relativistic drift

Thus, is Lacan's psychoanalysis relativistic? Yes, it is. It can seem paradoxical to define Lacan as a relativist, yet no one could classify him as dogmatic without appearing equally paradoxical. Let us look at this quote:

It starts from a certain degree of relativism, and of the most radical type of relativism with respect not simply to morals and institutions, but to truth itself, that there can begin to be posed the problem of ethics.⁴

The ethics of psychoanalysis falls within the tradition of modern relativism, for it can be worked out only from the crisis of truth that has been ongoing since the 16th century. A new ethical era began after Luther's attack against the *regula fidei* of the Christian truth, along with the subversion of the natural order by modern science. I would like to pause at these two events, which overlapped at the threshold of the 16th century. They mark the beginning of the deep symbolic seismic event that shook the foundations of western subjectivity.

2. The guarantee of knowledge

The first event marks the transition from a pre-modern conception of natural knowledge to the new science. The new knowledge and new scientific language put forth by Galileo and Newton are made up of mathematical characters. While ancient knowledge of nature was still anthropomorphic, the new science is totally free from any anthropomorphism. "There comes a moment, with the sex-

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI. D'un Autre à l'autre*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 191: « Eh bien, c'est à partir d'un certain degré de relativisme, et du type le plus radical, relativisme au regard, non pas seulement des mœurs et des institutions, mais de la vérité elle-même, que peut commencer de se poser le problème de l'éthique. »

ual initiation of the mechanism, when the moorings are broken,”⁵ said Lacan. The importance of this passage cannot be exaggerated: the symbolic order is no longer anchored to a sexual lack and therefore is no longer a symbolic order, strictly speaking, but it intrudes as a register without order.⁶

The split introduced by the new knowledge construction is an internal rift in knowledge itself. Knowledge is no longer guaranteed by *truth*. What is lacking is not technical performativity, but the ultimate legitimacy of produced knowledge: the new science brings forth nothing but models, which are considered to asymptotically approach the truth of nature. In order to fully grasp the meaning of this rift, it is worth paying attention to the *pre-modern knowledge architecture*. In the dogmatic construction of natural theology, codified by Scholasticism, nature was conceived as “*the Creation*” and knowledge of nature included an understanding of God as its cause. In this orientation, God is both the principle of explanation and the guarantor of truth. This system of knowledge is interwoven with faith, partly built with reason (knowing nature), and partly grounded on faith (knowing God). On the contrary, if nature is conceived, as Galileo stated, as “a book written in mathematical characters,” then the act of divine creation falls beyond scientific knowledge; God is no longer necessary to the system of knowledge. And when God evaporates, the guarantee of truth about knowledge evaporates as well. Modern subjectivity emerged through this historical passage. Carved in a new topology, as described by Lacan in *Science and Truth*, modern subjectivity lies between knowledge and truth; this subjectivity is the subject of scientific discourse, but also the subject of psychoanalysis.

3. The guarantee of truth

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The second event is marked by Luther’s position in the dispute over the proper standard of religious knowledge. Luther denies the *regula fidei* as a criterion of truth. Namely, he refuses to consider as a criterion judging religious claims’ possible agreement with the Church tradition and authority. The two main consequences are: first, the refusal of the principle of the Pope as the only religious

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (1964)*. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, p. 152.

⁶ “It’s all to do with the intrusion of the symbolic register.” In Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis (1954–1955)*. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1988, p. 88.

authority; second, the assertion of a different principle according to which Christianity has one Gospel and all Christians have “the power to test and judge what is correct or incorrect in matters of faith.”⁷ Accordingly, any criterion for establishing the truth in religious matters, guaranteed by God through the Pope, vanishes, making room for the relativization of truth and the advancement of heresies.⁸ Truth is no longer guaranteed and begins to fade into opinion. All people are entitled to their opinion and all opinions are equal. It is the triumph of modern relativism.

A gap opens with the new science and the rejection of the *regula fidei* – a gap between knowledge and truth. It is to this gap that Lacan returns by defining the truth as unfathomable. He makes it the *point de capiton* on which belief is based, causing dupes to not err. Modern relativism radically questions the possibility of both religious and gnoseological truth. Its extension and depth re-launch the pre-Christian topics of radical scepticism stated by Pyrrhon and Sextus Empiricus, founders of Greek sceptical thought.

This is precisely the perspective that Lacan calls on regarding the truth. According to him, the analyst is: “the one who offers himself in the position of a subject supposed to know and who must, nevertheless, initially, and in a Pyrrhonian fashion, renounce any access to the truth.”

To this effect, the position of the analyst regarding the truth is even more than relativistic. It is, as Lacan says: “the fundamental position, then, of a subject imposing on himself an arrest at the threshold of truth.”⁹ In other words, the analyst is the one who assumes the subjective topology from the modern disjunction between truth and knowledge.¹⁰ And yet, Lacan does not yield to relativism.

⁷ Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520). Quoted by Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1979, p. 2.

⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 126.

⁹ « ...celui qui s’offre dans la position de sujet supposé savoir et qui doit pourtant, initialment et de façon pyrrhonienne renoncer à tout accès à la vérité... La position donc fondamentale d’un sujet comme s’imposant son propre arrêt au seuil de la vérité », in Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XIII. L’objet de la psychanalyse*, 2 February 1966 (unpublished).

¹⁰ « Il y a eu un petit éclair – entre deux mondes, si je puis dire, entre un monde passé et un monde qui va se réorganiser comme un superbe monde à venir. [...] la psychanalyse [...] aura

4. Logic and the *point de capiton*

On the one hand, Lacan follows the tradition that starts with Pyrrhon and flourishes again with Montaigne, Pascal, and Nietzsche; on the other hand, he puts forth his *point de capiton* to stop the relativistic drift. By so doing, he points to the very place defined by modern logicians. This place was defined by these same logicians, although they failed to achieve their goal, i.e. the ultimate, absolute, not relativistic foundation of mathematical knowledge. In order to show the unavoidable degree of relativism that still affected the most powerful logical positivism, Lacan focused on Frege, Russel, Gödel, Carnap, and Quine.

Logical thought unwillingly came upon the division between knowledge and truth, and demonstrated that it could not be saturated. This was done by means of the formalism peculiar to the exact sciences. It aimed at stitching together knowledge and truth; instead it found a black hole, an *umbilical point*. Hence, for Lacan, “it is logic that serves here as the subject’s navel.”¹¹

This umbilical point is where the logical construction of Frege¹² fails. Frege’s goal was to find the ultimate foundation of mathematical knowledge. In other words, he aimed at rendering mathematical knowledge into logical terms by building a perfect language with neither “variations of meaning nor contradiction.” By so doing, he wanted to make arithmetical knowledge *definitely true*.

When Frege was about to publish the second volume of *The Foundations of Arithmetic* he received a letter from Bertrand Russell (1902) announcing that he had found a fundamental contradiction which invalidated Frege’s whole work. Indeed, his theory entails an antinomy. The contradiction is now known as Russell’s paradox. Frege’s theory can be demonstrated as contradictory at its core, by means of the definition of a very particular type of set: *the set containing all sets that are not members of themselves*. Such a set does and does not contain it-

été un moment privilégié pendant lequel on aura eu une assez juste mesure de ce que c’est que ce que j’appelle dans mon discours le “parlêtre”. » Jacques Lacan, *Le triomphe de la religion*, Paris, Seuil, 2005, p. 87.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, “Science and Truth”, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 731.

¹² *The Foundations of Arithmetic: The Logical-Mathematical Investigation of the Concept of Number. Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, Vol. I (1893); Vol. II (1903). Jena: Verlag Hermann Pohle.

self as a member (“the set of all the sets that do not contain themselves contains itself if and only if it does not contain itself”). As a result, Frege’s definition of the set could not be used as a foundation for the concept of numbers, on which the foundation of mathematics itself depends. There are many versions of this antinomy, for example, “Suppose there is a village with only one barber, a man well-shaved who shaves all men who do not shave themselves. Does the barber shave himself?”

If answered yes, it is true (for he is well-shaved) but also false (for he shaves only the men who do not shave themselves); if the answer is no, it is also true (for he does not shave the men who shave themselves), as well as false (for he is well-shaved).

This antinomy cannot be overcome; it is real, even though we cannot decide on the truth of what is stated (Is it true or false that the barber shaves himself?). It is a gap. The ultimate foundation of arithmetical knowledge as truth begets an antinomy according to which one cannot decide whether the truth is true or not. In 1931 Gödel succeeded in positively stating this irreducible gap with his theorems on incompleteness. The simplified form of the second theorem goes like this: “No consistent system can be used to demonstrate its same consistency.” It is a demonstration that a principle of heteronomy governs mathematics: to establish the coherence of a system, a point of external support is needed.

As Lacan states, in mathematics: “we put our finger, in a domain that is apparently the most certain, on what is opposed to the whole grasp of discourse, of logical exhaustion, what introduces into it an irreducible gap. This is what we designate as the real.”¹³

This irreducible gap, inherent to language consistency, which points to the “impossible solution,” is what Lacan calls the Real.

¹³ « ...à aborder quelque chose en principe d’aussi simplifié comme réel que l’arithmétique, il a pu être démontré que quelque chose peut toujours s’énoncer, offert ou non à la déduction logique, qui s’articule comme en avance sur ce dont les prémisses, les axiomes, les termes fondateurs dont peut s’asseoir ladite arithmétique, permettent de présumer comme démontrable ou réfutable. Nous touchons là du doigt, en un domaine en apparence le plus sûr, ce qui s’oppose à l’entière prise du discours dans l’exhaustion logique, ce qui y introduit une béance irréductible. C’est là que nous désignons le réel. » In Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XIX. ...ou pire*, Paris, Seuil, 2011, p. 41.

The real, something that can be easily accessed, can be defined as impossible; it is impossible insofar as it proves from the very grasp of discourse the discourse of logic; this impossible, this real ought to be privileged by us. By us, by whom? By analysts.¹⁴

The Real ought to be privileged by analysts, for it is through the absence of a true guarantee that the analyst reaches a stopping point at the relativistic drift: “There is something that resists, I mean something about which one cannot just say any old thing.”¹⁵

What was a setback for those who, like Frege and Russell, ventured into the “real of mathematics” with the intention of proving its truth, is instead a success for Lacan. For this “impossible exhaustion” of logical truth “proves that one cannot give it any meaning whatsoever, [...] It resists [and] the style in which this imposes itself is that of the real; neither truth nor meaning dominate in it.”¹⁶ Meaning [*Sinn*] grasps the Real when it is pushed up to the point where its foundation is impossible.

Since truth is not knowledge *per se* but rather a point of failure, the lack of an ultimate foundation of knowledge, it cannot be confused with any opinion, being that each opinion is a kind of knowledge. Opinions are not equivalent in the position of truth, because it is a place inaccessible to knowledge, a foundation determining its consistency. Paradoxes of logic are umbilical points that work as

¹⁴ « Ce point vif illustre ce que je dis de la béance logicienne. Le réel peut se définir comme l'impossible, en tant qu'il s'avère de la prise même du discours logicien. Cet impossible-là, ce réel-là, doit être par nous privilégié. Par qui, nous ? Par les analystes. » In Jacques Lacan, *ibidem*, p. 42.

¹⁵ « C'est en cela que nous intéresse que soit ancré le réel. Ce réel, je le dis, pas pour rien, être mathématique, parce que, somme toute, à l'expérience de ce qu'il s'agit, de ce qui se formule, de ce qui s'écrit à l'occasion, nous pouvons toucher du doigt que, là, il y a quelque chose qui résiste, je veux dire dont on ne peut pas dire n'importe quoi. On ne peut pas donner n'importe quel sens au réel mathématique. » In Jacques Lacan, *ibidem*, p. 184.

¹⁶ « que la mathématique s'articule d'une façon telle que, en fin de compte, on ne sait même pas si c'est vrai, ni si ça a un sens. Ça prouve ceci, à savoir qu'on ne peut lui donner n'importe quel sens, ni dans l'ordre de la vérité, ni dans l'ordre du sens. Ça résiste, au point que ça abouti au résultat suivant, que je considère comme un succès, le succès même - le mode sous lequel ça s'impose est celui du réel, justement parce que ni le vrai ni le sens n'y dominant, ils sont secondaires. La position seconde de ces deux machins qui s'appellent le vrai et le sens restait inhabituelle aux gens, et ça leur donne un peu le tounis quand ils prennent la peine de penser. » In Jacques Lacan, *ibidem*, p.184.

limits and give consistency. If “truth has the structure of fiction,” it is ultimately because truth is limited and supported by an inaccessible point, illustrated by paradoxes.

What Lacan calls the “*supposition of the inaccessible*” is necessary in order to have a logical coherence of discourse.¹⁷ Analysts know that the rejection of this supposition is what clinically leads to interpretative delusion, with the implied loss of consistency.

At any rate, this supposition is a mere belief. Those who trust it are spared suffering the setback experienced by Russell and Frege. It is a fundamental belief which prevents those who are *duped* from erring and stops the drift that might make the discourse and the subjects lose their way in language.¹⁸

5. The Signification (*Bedeutung*) of the Phallus

Belief in the inaccessible prevents the loss of subjects in the endless referral to equivalent opinions. It is a “point of blockage.”¹⁹ It works within the language, thanks to a signifier marking the umbilical point of disjunction between truth (*Bedeutung*) and meaning (*Sinn*)²⁰. This point is inaccessible to meaning (*Sinn*), it is precisely where truth does not mean anything. And through it, the discourse may be consistent. It is the signifier of the very *Bedeutung*, the only “significance” of the language. This is the only reference, the only signifier referring to an object that is nothing but a lack; it is the signifier that has no meaning and, because of this, it can be the foundation for any possible meaning.²¹

¹⁷ « Supposition de l’inaccessible », in Jacques Lacan, *ibidem*, p. 178.

¹⁸ This is exactly the difference between the neurotic position and the psychotic position, which corresponds to the refusal of belief as such: “But how, then, does Freud define the psychotic position? Precisely by what he strangely calls, *Unglauben*, not wanting to know anything about the spot where truth is in question.” In Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (1969-1970). The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, New York and London, Norton & Company, 2007, p. 91.

¹⁹ « Le point se définit... par le coinçage », in Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XXI. Les non-dupes errent*, 13 November 1973 (unpublished).

²⁰ Lacan follows on the path opened by Gottlob Frege in his classic paper *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*.

²¹ « *Bedeutung*, il n’y en a qu’une, die *Bedeutung* des *Phallus*. C’est là seul ce qui est, du langage, dénoté, mais sans que jamais rien n’y répond. » In Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVIII. D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 170.

According to Lacan, the symbolic phallus²² bears the *Bedeutung* of the paradoxical point described by Frege, Russel, and Gödel as the inaccessible pivotal point of any logical language.

Because in tackling this field from the outside, from logic, nothing prevents us from forging the signifier by which there is connoted what is wanting in the signifying articulation itself. [...] this signifier with which a subject, in the final analysis, can be satisfied by identifying himself with it as identical to the very lack of discourse.²³

In clinical practice Freud discovered the cardinal rule of this signifier in the psychic life of all human beings. If it is present: 1) it acts as the fundamental identification of the subject (the identity principle); 2) it introduces him into the register of truth; 3) it permits the construction of a coherent discourse, following the laws of language and its inter-dictions. If it is absent, its role is not less cardinal. Its absence produces the disappearance of the subject from language as well as the endless drift of truth and meaning.

In modern times this endless drift has become the dominant characteristic of the symbolic life that sets discourses and subjectivities. At this point the psychoanalyst is to play his historical role, becoming the *synthome* of our era. It would be difficult to explain in a few words what the consequences of this thesis are. In short, speaking of the psychoanalyst as a *synthome* of our era means that psychoanalytic ethics are not relativistic. They do not mix truth as an empty value with truth as an opinion. Truth is an inaccessible value, marked by a cardinal signifier, writing the impossible sexual relationship between knowledge and truth. This cardinal signifier is the end of any psychoanalytic itinerary.

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Among the four discourses Lacan presented at the end of the 1960s, psychoanalytic discourse is the one which allows that this cardinal signifier exits from “the apparent necessity of the phallic function” and “turns out to be mere contin-

²² Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus”, *Ecrits*, New York and London, Norton & Company, 2002, pp. 575–584.

²³ « Rien ne nous a jamais empêchés, semble-t-il, de forger le signifiant dont se connote ce qui fait défaut dans l’articulation signifiante même. [...] Peut être pourrions nous [...] démontrer [...] que ne peut se situer ce signifiant dont un sujet se satisfasse au dernier terme pour s’y identifier, comme identique au défaut même du discours, [...] la notion de la castration – que vous avez sentie au passage, j’espère, être l’analogie de ce que j’annonce. » Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVI. D’un Autre à l’autre*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 85.

gency.” Indeed, “it is as a mode of the contingent that the phallic function stops not being written.”²⁴

Through the writing of this signifier, psychoanalytic discourse marks the connection between truth and knowledge as mutually exclusive. Knowledge aroused during a psychoanalytic itinerary is constrained “to the production of S_1 that is, of the signifier by which can be resolved what? Its relation to truth.”²⁵ The analyst can support anyone in his search for a sound point to hook on to, in the absence of any guarantee. Since the analyst found it for himself in “the point of radical eccentricity with respect to itself,” which is the point of “the radical heteronomy that Freud’s discovery shows gaping within man [and which] can no longer be covered over without whoever tries to hide it being fundamentally dishonest.”²⁶

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge (1972–1973). Encore. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, New York and London, Norton & Company, 1999, p. 94.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge (1972–1973). Encore. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, New York London, Norton & Company, 1999, p. 91.

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud”, *Ecrits*, New York and London, Norton & Company, 2002, p. 436.