

Lacan: The Limits of Love and Knowledge

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In [Encore \(Seminar XX\)](#), Lacan (1998) asserts, “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship,” and, invoking Aristotle, among others, endeavors to show the limits of knowledge. What is the connection between love and knowledge? For Lacan, the connection is made with his notion of *jouissance*, particularly in his distinction between phallic *jouissance* and an Other *jouissance*.

“All the needs of speaking beings are contaminated” writes Lacan (1998) by the fact that being involved in an other satisfaction . . . that those needs may not live up to” (p. 51). Lacan invokes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to demonstrate how language is driven by this failure to live up to this Other satisfaction. Why did Aristotle “get so worked up?” asked Lacan. According to my reading of Lacan, phallic *jouissance* cannot live up to the Other *jouissance*; it is contaminated by being involved with this Other satisfaction. Aristotle is worked up because he is concerned with the Good. That Aristotle seeks the Good implies that there must be some deficiency. Phallic *jouissance* must fail or be deficient. As Lacan writes, “. . . perhaps *jouissance* shows that in itself it is deficient--for, in order for it be that way, something about it mustn’t be working” (p. 55). Phallic *jouissance*, of course, is the *jouissance* of language: “Reality is approached with the apparatus of *jouissance*...there’s no other *jouissance* than language. That is how *jouissance* is fitted out in speaking beings” (p. 55). Aristotle uses language to approach reality. Yet, if the *jouissance* of language was sufficient, didn’t fail, why else would Aristotle search? Knowledge finds its motor force in the deficiency of *jouissance*. We have the idea that we are missing some satisfaction, so we develop systems of knowledge.

The connection between Aristotle’s quest for the knowledge of the Good and the failure of the sexual relationship hinges on Lacan’s structural distinction between the masculine and feminine. Lacan situates the feminine in such a way that Woman is related to this Other, supplementary *jouissance* compared to what the phallic function designates by way of *jouissance* (p. 73). “There is a *jouissance* that is hers (*a elle*), that belongs to that ‘she’ (*elle*) that doesn’t exist and doesn’t signify anything. There is a *jouissance* that is hers about which she herself knows nothing if not that she experiences it--that much she knows” (p. 74) This *jouissance*, “beyond the phallus,” is also related to the body, “the *jouissance* of the body” (p. 74) The problem with this Woman is that she is barred, and thus cannot be written, nor can this Other *jouissance* of the body to which she is related. Thus, if knowledge is aiming toward this Other

jouissance, it misses precisely because knowledge of the real is approached by language.

Lacan calls masculine, phallic jouissance the jouissance of the “vanquished idiot” (p. 56). The “vanquished idiot” believes he is “master”: “I am master of myself as I am of the universe.” Why a “vanquished idiot”? Because, explains Lacan, “the universe is the place where, due to the fact of speaking, everything succeeds (*de dire, tout reussit*) . . . in making the sexual relationship fail (*faire rater*) in a male manner” (p. 56) Precisely because it speaks, phallic jouissance fails to be the jouissance that “should be/never fails” (p. 59) Here, Lacan plays off the French terms, *failloir*, “one must, one should, one has to, it is necessary,” and *faillir*, “fail, falter, default, miss, come up short” (footnote, p. 59). If there were another jouissance as opposed to phallic jouissance, “it wouldn’t be/could never fail to be the one.” Lacan’s use of a double negative is a way of avoiding a reduction of this Other jouissance to the economy of phallic jouissance. What then does Lacan mean?

In my reading of Lacan, the Other jouissance would not be because to be would mean to be spoken for, and, for this Other jouissance to be spoken for would be to bring it into the masculine economy of phallic jouissance. “It is precisely because the said jouissance [which I am reading as phallic jouissance] speaks that the sexual relationship is not” (p. 61). In speaking, fantasy is constituted in place of the real. Thus, the Other jouissance is situated in the real, while the phallic jouissance is situated in the imaginary (p. 63). The Other jouissance shouldn’t be, but it never fails; it never fails to diminish phallic jouissance. Phallic jouissance is fallible; it fails us, disappoints us. Why? Because it aims at the object and not the partner. It is “homosexual” jouissance, a masculine jouissance, which, in attempting to reach the Other, reduces it to the One. Since desire is articulated in language, a barrier is erected between desire that is articulated in language and what will actually fulfill me. Phallic jouissance always leaves something to be desired. While phallic jouissance is fallible, therefore, the Other jouissance is infallible. To bring the Other into the totalizing system of the One, the whole, is then to reduce that Other to an object. Woman is not-whole, not closed, not encapsulated, Other, and, as such, has a relationship to this Other jouissance which is foreclosed to men who are wholly within the phallic economy of the One.

To understand the failure of phallic jouissance, it is necessary that one understands Lacan’s conception of object (a): the cause of desire. Fink (1995) defines object (a): “as the residue of symbolization--the real (R2) that remains, insists, and ex-sists after or despite symbolization--as the traumatic cause, and as that which interrupts the smooth functioning of law and the automatic unfolding of the signifying chain” (p. 83). When Fink says that object (a) causes desire, he means that “it” elicits desire, but this desire has no object. Desire never sits still, never seeks complete satisfaction,

but always more! More! Encore, encore! In this sense, object (a) is not an object in the sense of object-relations. Rather, “it is the rem(a)inder of the lost hypothetical mother-child unity” (Fink, 1995, p. 94). For example, when the child is nurtured by the breast of the mother, the breast is not a partial object, but is simply enjoyed by the infant. However, when the infant finds itself failed by the breast (e.g., when the infant is hungry and mother is not there to feed), the absent breast is called to be symbolized. Only when the infant fails to be satisfied does the breast become an object. At the moment the breast as partial object is made manifest by the child, the unity of infant and mother is already severed. Object (a), therefore, is understood as that “leftover of that process of constituting an object, the scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization” (Fink, 1995, p. 94). As soon as the breast is symbolized as a breast separate from the infant, object (a) is constituted after the fact as the prior satisfaction which has been lost: That Other satisfaction that shouldn’t be/never fails. At the moment the Other is symbolized as an object relation, *that’s not it*.

Fink (1995) distinguishes between two different levels of the real, R1 and R2:

1) a real before the letter, that is, a presymbolic real, which, in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis (R1), and 2) a real after the letter which is characterized by impasses and impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself (R2), that is, which is generated by the symbolic. (p. 27)

The second real is the real of the Other jouissance. That is, the first real returns as a scrap which causes a force around which the symbolic order circles, but which it never “hits.” According to Fink, Lacan tends to speak of this second real in terms of logical paradoxes to illustrate that “the supposed set of signifiers can never be complete,” because the symbolic order depends upon a kink within the very order so that it can be a set (p. 29) Fink gives an example borrowed from Bertrand Russell. Suppose that one were to develop a catalog of all catalogs which do not include themselves as an entry; this would set up a logical impossibility. If the catalog were to truly be a catalog of all catalogs that do not include themselves as an entry, it would have to include itself. Yet, if the catalog included itself, the catalog would list itself in violation of its own rule. However, if the catalog did not include itself as an entry, the catalog would no longer be a catalog of all catalogues that do not include themselves as an entry, because one catalog, the catalog itself, would be missing. The second level real is akin to the logical impossibility of the catalog of all catalogs that do not include themselves as an entry. “In short, there is cause only in something that doesn’t work” (Lacan, 1994, p. 25). The cause, as such, is a remainder, “outside” of, undetermined by, and yet which ex-sists as the center of gravity for the symbolic order: the traumatic Real.

To return momentarily to Aristotle, Lacan appropriates classic Aristotelean philosophy to distinguish between the determination of the symbolic, on the one hand, and the determination of the Real or cause, on the other. *Tuche*, as the real or cause, emphasizes the unconscious as cause, whereas the *automaton* refers to the unconscious as systematically determined (Lacan, 1994). During the free association of psychoanalysis, there is an automatic memory of sorts, which is governed by an underlying determination, but, at a certain point, it comes to a stop. This point where the automaton fails is the cause which “doesn’t work,” and, thus, where the real shows itself as that which refuses signification.

As Verhaeghe (1999) explains: “The two elements have to be understood as one point of convergence, and that is the ultimate cause” (p. 8). The automaton, as the Symbolic, systematically determines which signifiers cannot appear in the chain of signifieds, and, as such, determines the emergence of the Real or *tuche* as the negation of the symbolic. On the other hand, the presence of a gap in the chain itself--that lack which we’ve discussed above as object (a)--is the very condition of a systematically determined chain of signifiers. Thus, we see the difference between the determination of the automaton and the *tuche* as cause. The systematically determined chain of signifiers, the Symbolic, determines the lack, but the *tuche*, as lack, causes the chain. Thus, the real and the symbolic are two elements which have one point of convergence.

While it is still unclear how this is all related to the sexual relationship, or lack thereof, it does have immediate implications for a Lacanian understanding of embodiment. By the end of [Seminar XI](#), Lacan (1994) states: “The relation of the subject with the organ is at the heart of our experience” (p. 91). With the organ? It seems that, by invoking this language of “the organ,” Lacan is invoking the Other body, the real body which is the body of the Other *jouissance* mentioned above. Prior to this seminar, however, Lacan appears to have understood the body as purely determined by the symbolic order, a mere signified body. But, as Verhaeghe (1999) explains, “From the moment that Lacan takes the Real seriously, another body enters the game, one for which the signifier ‘body’ isn’t very useful anymore” (p. 9).

In the case of the signified body, the body is determined by the Symbolic, and, thus, by the demand of the Other. As the first Other, the mother demands and desires certain things, and, typically (the exception being autism), the child develops a body consciousness and a consciousness of the Other’s desire which becomes his or her own. “The subject,” writes Lacan (1988):

originally locates and recognizes desire through the intermediary, not only of his own image, but of the body of his fellow being. It’s exactly at that moment that the human

being's consciousness, in the form of consciousness of self, distinguishes itself. It is in so far as he recognizes his desire in the body of the other that the exchange takes place. It is in so far as his desire has gone over to the other side that he assimilates himself to the other and recognises himself as a body (p. 147).

Paradoxically, for Lacan, self-consciousness originates with the Other, and thus the ego is a "misjudgement." Later, in [Seminar XI](#), Lacan (1994) elaborates upon this theme in describing "the advent of the subject." In Lacan's early work, the desire of the Other is sought to fill a lack, and this central lack is understood to be the "phallus." Similar but different from object (a), the phallus "denotes nothing but the lack in the Symbolic as such, which insists between, behind the signifiers," attempting to fill it in, "in the relationship between mother and child" (Verhaeghe, 1999, p. 5). The phallus, in this sense, is that which is worthy of desire, thus, Lacan refers to the phallus in different ways, including the "signifier of desire," "man's desire is the Other's desire," the "signifier of the Other's desire," etc. (Fink, 1995, pp. 101-102). The phallus, in a sense, stands in for the Other's desire, the cause of desire, object (a), which cannot be signified. The phallus, for Lacan, is directly related to his understanding of "castration," since, as Fink (1995) explains, "whereas castration refers to a primordial loss which sets the structure in motion, the phallus is the signifier of that loss" (p. 102). Or as Lacan (1977) writes: "the phallus functions as the signifier of the lack of being...that determines the subject in his relation to the signifier" (p. 103).

By [Seminar XI](#), Lacan (1994) speaks of a double lack. Not surprisingly, given the formulation thus far, the lack of the phallus is preceded by the lack of object (a). As Verhaeghe (1999) writes: "The phallic instance is in itself already an interpretation of the radical lack which is expressed by object a" (p. 5). Thus, as mentioned above, the Real shows itself in the failure of the Symbolic-Imaginary when the subject meets with a trauma that cannot be interpreted in a phallic way. By bringing in "the organ," Lacan elaborates on this lack. "The object (a)," Lacan (1994) writes, "is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking" (p. 103). The organism appears to be the real which functions as cause, and which precedes the loss in the chain of signifiers. What are we to make of this primordial loss?

Lacan's very difficult concept of "the drive" appears to be an attempt to articulate this primordial loss. By "the drive," Lacan seems to mean a drive which precedes the partial drives of the phallic, and, thus, "the drive" is prior to "genderisation" (Verhaeghe, 1999, p. 10). It is only afterward, in retrospect, that the phallic Symbolic addresses this lack in terms of the second lack by the partial drives. The primordial loss, therefore, seems to precede the separation from the mother.

To pinpoint what Lacan means by this primordial loss is, I submit, to understand the relationship between the body, jouissance, and the failed sexual relationship. As mentioned previously, the Other jouissance is the jouissance of the body, and now we can make the claim that, by jouissance of the body, Lacan is referring to the body as organism. The jouissance of the body as organism is “beyond the pleasure principle”--thus the Other jouissance--while the pleasure of the pleasure principle remains within the phallic economy; that is, within the realm of the signifier. The key is that this Other jouissance of the body as organism is a body outside language, and, as such, it is a body which is also “beyond gender differentiation” (Verhaeghe, 1999, p. 16). Given that this Other jouissance is outside of language, Woman is opened to the possibility of this Other jouissance precisely because she is not-whole--that is, “not totally subjected to the phallic principle” (Verhaeghe, 1999, p. 17). That this Other jouissance is outside the symbolic, and thus outside the operation of the phallic signifier, there is no such thing as a sexual relationship. “Phallic jouissance is the obstacle owing to which man does not come, I would say, to enjoy woman’s body, precisely because what he enjoys is the jouissance of the organ” (p. 17). In other words, with the jouissance of the Other, if it is “beyond gender differentiation,” there can be no sexual relationship because to enjoy the jouissance of the organ is to already enjoy “a jouissance of the body beyond the phallus” (Lacan, 1998, p. 20). As Verhaeghe (1999) explains:

. . . the relationship between man and woman beyond the phallic turns out to be the same relationship as the one between the subject and the Real of the body, i.e., the relationship between the phallic and the other jouissance. But this “to arrive beyond” is not a goal in itself, on the contrary, the first reaction of the subject will be anxiety, and the phallic enjoyment has to be understood as a defense against the enjoyment of the body as an organism. Indeed, this form of enjoyment implies leaving the Symbolic...and thus entails the disappearance, i.e., the death of the subject. (pp. 17-18)

The “beyond the pleasure principle” of this Other jouissance (it should be no surprise at this point) is the death drive: when the subject disappears from the Symbolic, it implies the death of the subject as subject. Lacan is providing a particular interpretation of Freud’s life and death drives, also known as Eros and Thanatos. Eros, for Freud, has to do with synthesis, creating ever greater unities until the One is reached. Thanatos, on the other hand, pushes toward disintegration. Yet, phallic jouissance includes a death of its own. For one, it ends with orgasm, “*la petite mort*,” but more significantly, phallic jouissance results in separation, which would appear to be the disintegration of Thanatos rather than the synthesis of Eros. While the Other jouissance means the death of the subject, “the subject disappears into a larger whole” (p. 18).

So, Aristotle seeks the Good in language, because there is this Other jouissance which is lacking and which causes the phallic jouissance of his thinking. In the end, writes Lacan (1998), Aristotle, as well as Plato, write statements that “are based only on a fantasy by which they tried to make up for what in no way can be said, namely, the sexual relationship” (p. 82).

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