

# On Psychoanalysis and Freedom: Lacan vs. Heidegger

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**Abstract:** This essay seeks to clarify a Lacanian conception of freedom with particular attention to its contrast with the perspective of Heidegger. The point of departure is Lacan's concept of *das Ding*, a concept which, while it appears to echo Heidegger's famous essay about "The Thing," must be carefully relinked with its point of origin in a brief passage from Freud's unpublished "Project for a Scientific Psychology." Of greatest import is to adequately appreciate the linkage between the Thing and the birth and function of the signifier. With that linkage in mind, it is possible to see the contours of a distinctly Lacanian conception of freedom, rooted in the subject's relation to language. The result is a theory of freedom that is significantly different from that put forward by Heidegger; broadly speaking, a theory framed in linguistic rather than phenomenological terms.

**Keywords:** Freedom, *das Ding*, *Nebenmensch*, cedable object, part object, extimacy, phenomenology, revelation

Lacan famously claimed never to have spoken about freedom, which may in a sense be true, depending on your definition of freedom.<sup>1</sup> Though if we accept the dictum of Epictetus—"free is he who lives as he desires"—we might equally well conclude that Lacan hardly spoke of anything else. In this respect, Lacan might even be offered as a worthy successor of Sartre, though certainly not for propounding Sartre's brand of radical voluntarism, nor by virtue of criticizing Freud, as Sartre did, for asserting the contradiction of an unconscious consciousness. If anything, Lacan can be said to have overcome the contradiction by means of fully embracing it and, in the process, to have opened up a new conception of a non-voluntarist freedom. Which ultimately means that Lacan was true less to Sartre than to the legacy of German idealism, the movement that upended two millennia of thinking about the meaning of contradiction in Hegel's concept of the negative, and that began with Kant's radical breakthrough in clarifying the paradoxical character of freedom, according to which the subject realizes its freedom in the moment that it submits itself unrestrainedly to the pure principle of the law. We should hear an echo of that paradox, albeit in a different conceptual frame, in Lacan's insistence that the refusal to concede upon one's own desire is achieved precisely by submitting to the defile of a signifying chain.

But let us start again at the beginning. How exactly are we to conceive Lacan's contribution to the problem of freedom? It was indeed Kant who set the parameters of the problem. The toughest part of the

<sup>1</sup> In part inspired by Lacan's claim never to have spoken of freedom, a one-day conference was organized in Maastricht under the title "The Phantom of Liberty: Psychoanalysis as a Philosophy of Freedom?"

question, even more difficult than determining whether or not we are in fact free, is conceptualizing how something like freedom might be possible at all. Perhaps the first thing to be said with respect to the question of freedom à la Lacan is that he offers a theory of the human being that is partially, but decisively detached from nature. The upshot of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is to assert a deracination from instinctual predetermination.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the prematurity of human birth, motor coordination in the developing infant is guided less by any predetermined response to stimuli than by a more general tropism of perception toward formal unities, and in particular toward mimicry of the imago of the fellow human being. The result is the establishment of a margin of independence from the instinctual regulation of the animal and a concomitantly heightened attunement to what Gestalt psychologists call the perceptual *Prägnanz*, the pure unitary form, of objects.

With this result, however, we are already faced with a paradox, insofar as the Lacanian imaginary is as alienating as it is liberating.<sup>3</sup> The subject comes to itself only outside of itself and, even then, only in the form of an illusion. We are well familiar with the extended consequences of this fact, among which is that the discourse of free choice becomes a mere alibi of the ego, an illusion of self determination, an almost irresistible temptation to be seduced by a fantasy of independent agency. Pressed into the service of its primary ideological function, this fantasy of freedom becomes the linchpin of the pivotal political *méconnaissance* of our epoch. From this perspective, the most proudly proclaimed achievement of modernity, that of the abolition of slavery, merely inoculates us more securely against recognizing its new reality. Congratulating ourselves about the end of chattel servitude paradoxically allows the exploitation of wage labor to disappear behind the apparently incontrovertible claim that every worker voluntarily contracts for his or her own employment. Trumpeting the end of slavery is among the more dependable pillars of support for the cardinal lie of bourgeois society: everyone is their own master. As Lacan himself observes, "we live in a society in which slavery isn't recognized. It's nevertheless clear to any sociologist or philosopher that it has in no way been abolished."<sup>4</sup>

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 2The argument for such a deracination is a primary thrust of Lacan's early essay on "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the / Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," Lacan 2006, pp. 75-81.

3The point is made in "The Mirror Stage" and expanded upon in "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," Lacan 2006, pp. 82-101.

4 Lacan, 1993, p. 132.

### Lacan and Heidegger

The question thus arises: is there some other, less merely ideological sense of freedom available from a Lacanian perspective? Certainly not in the view of Martin Heidegger, who counted himself among the critics who charge psychoanalysis with being incapable of doing justice to human freedom. As his Zollikon Seminars make clear, Heidegger regarded Freud's new science as an effort to extend the dominion of mechanistic causality from conscious mental life into the nether-realm of the unconscious, explaining dreams, symptoms, and parapraxes in terms of equally mechanical causes that operate beyond or beneath the level of conscious awareness. Meeting Lacan at the height of his interest in Heidegger's own thought apparently didn't help in this regard. In the aftermath of his visit to France, Heidegger quipped to Medard Boss that the psychiatrist seemed to him to be in need of a psychiatrist.<sup>5</sup>

But what if Heidegger had actually read Lacan? What if he had taken seriously Lacan's own definition of cause, which identifies it with *das Ding*? The stress Lacan puts on this point is striking. "At the heart of man's destiny," he says, "is the *Ding*, the *causa* . . . it is the *causa panthomenon*, the cause of the most fundamental human passion."<sup>6</sup> Surely Heidegger would have been intrigued, given his own extended reflection on "*Das Ding*," an essay Lacan commented upon extensively, in which the Thing is identified with the void that inhabits the pot or jug.<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger, this ur-object of human making, remnants of which are taken by archeologists to be among the surest signs of the ancient existence of *homo sapiens*, is essentially a core emptiness sheltered by a cowl of clay. Indeed, the emptiness is the essential thing. The wall of clay allows for a zone of pure vacancy to yawn open and offer itself for use.

How, then, to understand Lacan's teaching on this key point? How does *das Ding* function as cause, and how, if at all, is it related to freedom? More than once Lacan refers the answer to the reflections of the mystics. "Freud left us with the problem of a gap once again at the level of *das Ding*," he says, "which is that of religious men and mystics."<sup>8</sup> In his twentieth seminar, Lacan compares his own *Écrits* to "mystical jaculations."<sup>9</sup> It is there that Lacan recalls Bernini's rapturous depiction of Teresa of Avila, of which Lacan says that it's obvious that she's

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 5 Heidegger 1987, p. 348.

6 Lacan 1992, p. 97. In this quote, Lacan intentionally indulges in a salad of Greek and Latin. Earlier, he had noted the etymological derivation of the French word "*chose*" (thing) from the Latin *causa*. Lacan 1992, p. 43.

7 Heidegger 1975, p. 166ff.

8 Lacan 1992, p. 100.

9 Lacan 1998, p. 76

coming, even if it isn't clear exactly what she's coming from. In the same sentence, Lacan also refers us to a more obscure figure, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Beguine, Hadewijch of Brabant. Lacan may well have been familiar with the following astonishing passage from one of Hadewijch's letters: "If it maintains its worthy state," she writes, "the soul is a bottomless abyss in which God suffices to himself . . . Soul is a way for the passage of God from his depths into his liberty; and God is a way for the passage of the soul into its liberty, that is, into his inmost depths, which cannot be touched except by the soul's abyss."<sup>10</sup>

It will be my thesis that this passage condenses Lacan's most essential point, namely that the subject comes to itself and is freed into the space of its own liberated singularity only by entering and being entered by the space of what is unfathomable in the Other. It is this unfathomable dimension, opened in the Other in a way that provides an opening in the subject itself, that Lacan calls *das Ding*. In what follows, I will rely on this point of Lacan's teaching to make a few tentative remarks about freedom from a psychoanalytic point of view, with special reference to its contrast with that of Heidegger.

### Regrasping the Thing

Much of the commentary on Lacan's notion of *das Ding* has tended to follow a Kantian clue, posing the Lacanian Thing as cousin to the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*, the inaccessible and unknowable kernel of objects. This quasi-Kantian approach, while certainly not without some value, risks distracting us from an absolutely key point: the inaugural dimension of the Lacanian *Ding* concerns not objects but other people.<sup>11</sup> The original unthinkable object is *the fellow human being*. This conclusion is unmistakable when we return to the text of Freud's unpublished "Project for a Scientific Psychology" from which Lacan takes his point of departure. Freud there points to the "perceptual complex" of the fellow human being, or *Nebenmensch*, which is divided between what the child recognizes on the basis of similarities to its own body—precisely the sort of mirroring that Lacan associates with the imaginary—and a locus of something that is "new and non-comparable," a dimension of something unknown.<sup>12</sup> This uncognizable excess Freud calls *das Ding*. It is this division of the *Nebenmensch* between a familiar imago and a margin of something excessive and as yet unknown that will serve as the template for of all the child's future attempts to explore the world of objects. "For this reason," says Freud, "it is in relation to the fellow human-being that a

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10 Hadewijch 1980, p. 86.

11 Lacan lays out his reading of *das Ding* in the first half of his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. See Lacan 1992, pp.

12 Freud 1955, 1:331.

human-being learns to cognize."<sup>13</sup>

Lacan's crucial addition to Freud's sketch of *das Ding* is to assert that the enigmatic locus of something uncognized in the Other becomes the root source of anxiety.<sup>14</sup> "Not only is [anxiety] not without object," he says in the seminar devoted to topic, "but it very likely designates the most, as it were, profound object, the ultimate object, the Thing."<sup>15</sup> The challenge of the Other-Thing consists not simply in the discovery of something inaccessible at the heart of the Other but in the way that discovery raises the unsettling question of what object I am for that unknown desire. "What provokes anxiety....," says Lacan, "is not, contrary to what is said, the rhythm of the mother's alternating presence and absence. The proof of this is that the infant revels in repeating this game of presence and absence. . . . The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely . . . when the mother is on his back all the while, and especially when she's wiping his backside."<sup>16</sup>

There is a striking resemblance between this Lacanian version of the mother/child relation and the account offered by Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>17</sup> At a crucial point of her argument in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir appeals to the Freudian Oedipus complex for understanding the deep roots of masculine ambivalence toward the feminine, though, as she is quick to point out, the lesson to be taken depends on inverting a key piece of Freud's conception. The core of the Oedipus complex is not, as Freud thought, that the child's tie to the mother must be broken by the threat of castration. On the contrary, the child initiates its own separation, seeking an autonomy that can be achieved only by a certain rejection of the maternal embrace. Lacan's argument appears to echo this key point. He could well be paraphrasing de Beauvoir when he insists that "it's not true that the child is weaned. He weans himself. He detaches himself from the breast."<sup>18</sup>

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13 Ibid.

14 I capitalize "Other" here and will continue to do so throughout this essay, but the choice is an awkward one in so far as "Other" must do double duty between the concepts of the little and big Others. In fact, Lacan himself alternates in his capitalization of *Autre* throughout his work without any perfect consistency. The most logical thing would seem to be using the lower case for the little other and the upper case for the big Other. But then again, even the little other of the fellow human being sometimes deserves the emphasis lent by the capitalization, precisely because, when its Thingly dimension is taken into account, the fellow human being becomes something totally different than the impression of ordinary experience leads us to conclude. It is to recognize this point that I will retain the capitalization even of the "little Other."

15 Lacan 2014, p. 311.

16 Lacan 2014, pp. 53-54.

17 de Beauvoir 1989, pp. 195-196. The passage in question occurs at the climax of what is arguably the most essential chapter of *The Second Sex*, Chapter Nine "Dreams, Fears, Idols."

18 Lacan 2014, p. 327. Cf. also: "It's not longing for the maternal breast that provokes anxiety, but its imminence." Lacan 2014, p. 53. "The most decisive moment in the anxiety at issue, the anxiety of

Is Lacan then merely repeating de Beauvoir here? Not at all. The point of convergence between them only makes it more essential to clarify Lacan's distance from de Beauvoir, who departs from Freud merely in claiming that what separates the child from the mother is not the father's threat of castration but rather the force of the child's own desire for autonomy. For Lacan, by contrast, the problem isn't the desire of the child, but rather that of the mother, in as much as her desire is at some level encountered as a disconcerting unknown. The child turns away from the mother to avoid the abyssal question about what she really wants.

It is in the light of this perspective that we can make sense of Lacan's likening the mother to a giant praying mantis.<sup>19</sup> To the extent that the mother appears animated by an unfathomable desire, the child is left in a vaguely unnerving uncertainty about whether, or how, he or she can possibly succeed in satisfying it. In the same stroke, we can interpret Lacan's characterization of the *objet a* as *un objet cessible*, a cedable or yieldable object. In the prototypical incarnations of the *objet a*—the breast, the feces, the penis—the subject's "pound of flesh" is exchanged, even "sacrificed," in order to create a margin of safe separation from the Other.<sup>20</sup> In effect, a body part is psychically given up in order to establish a space of exchange, a kind of security zone, between subject and Other. As Lacan says of it, "sacrifice is not at all intended to be an offering, nor a gift, both of which are propagated in a quite different dimension, but the capture of the Other in the web of desire."<sup>21</sup>

**From the Thing to the Signifier**

In the originary drama with the maternal Thing, the inarticulate cry of the infant becomes in itself a ceded object, indeed the very first such object, given up into the space between the subject and the Other.<sup>22</sup> As Lacan says, "this manifestation of anxiety coincides with the very emergence in the world of he who is going to be the subject. This manifestation is his cry... this first effect of cession... the nursling can't do anything about the cry that slips out of him. He has yielded something and nothing will

weaning, is not so much when the breast falls short of the subject's need, it's rather that the infant yields the breast to which he is appended as a portion of himself." Lacan 2014, p. 313

19 Cf. Lacan 2014, p. 22

20 "In the body there is always, by virtue of this engagement in the signifying dialectic, something that is separated off, something that is sacrificed, something inert, and this something is the pound of flesh." Lacan 2014, p. 219.

21 Lacan 2014, p. 277

22 It is useful to note at this juncture that Lacan adds to the list of more familiar embodiments of the *objet a* not only the gaze and the voice, but also the phoneme.

ever conjoin him to it again."<sup>23</sup> The first inchoate eruptions of the voice are thus inflected with anxiety, and inevitably so. But as such, they also open and begin to shape the interval between the subject and the Other and, with the unfolding of a signifying network, become the means by which the question of the Other, the enigma of *das Ding*, will be ceaselessly re-posed. In the process of such repetition, the resources of the signifier allows for the posing the question of the subject's own coming-to-be, rooted in the real of the subject's mute *jouissance*.

This little series of notes on *das Ding* prompts us to emphasize three elemental dimensions of the Lacanian signifier.

1) *Separation*

The first dimension concerns *separation from the Other*. A primary result of Lacan's view is to assert that most archaic function of speech and language, far from connecting the subject to the fellow human being, is to achieve an indispensable degree of detachment, a margin of separation and independence that puts the neighbor-Thing at a distance. We can therefore assert anew, with a shock of unexpected literalness, that the word is indeed "the murder of the Thing."<sup>24</sup> The function of the signifier might therefore be said to be an exemplary instance, indeed *the* exemplary instance of *Aufhebung*. The signifier both cancels *das Ding*, distancing the subject from it, yet also preserves it in a locus suspended between the subject and the Other.

For this Lacanian perspective, the word functions less to connect the subject to the Other than to insert a distance between the two.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, Lacan's account is as violent to common sense as it is to mainstream linguistics. Nevertheless, we get glimpses of a similar notion elsewhere. When, for example, Hannah Arendt begins *The Human Condition* with the 1957 launching of the first orbital satellite, the Russian "Sputnik," she expresses her amazement that this unprecedented achievement was immediately recognized, in the words of one American reporter, as a first 'step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth'." The reporter's comment echoed the words of the pioneering Soviet physicist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, words that came to be inscribed on his tombstone, that "mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever." To follow out the consequences of Lacan's concept of *das Ding* is to realize that Sputnik was merely a technologically elaborated successor to the primordial example, as Arendt puts it, of an "object made by man launched into the universe." The original such object is none other than

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23 Lacan 2014, p. 326.

24 Lacan attributes the phrase to Hegel, though it is fairly evident that the actual wording derives not from Hegel himself but from Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures on Hegel Lacan assiduously attended.

25 This point is audible in Lacan's repeated rejection of notions of "intersubjectivity" and his frequent critiques of conceiving language as first of all a means of "communication."

the signifier, and it is launched for the same underlying reason, that of gaining a measure of escape, of achieving a margin of independence, from the gravitational bond of the Other.

Some echo of the same point is audible in a remark by the primatologist Sue Savage-Rumbaugh. While most of Savage-Rumbaugh's work aimed at closing the gap between humans and our simian relatives, she remained acutely cognizant of the distance between humans and the apes. "When I am with bonobos," she said, "I feel like I have something that I shared with them long ago but I forgot. As we've clothed ourselves and separated ourselves, we've gained a wonderful society, but we've lost a kind of soul-to-soul connection that they maintain."<sup>26</sup> Lacan's theory of *das Ding* points to precisely such a loss of fusional connection. The implication of the Lacanian view is that a certain loss of immediate creaturely communion, the replacement of an empathic link with a distinct measure of distance from the Other, is a prime condition of becoming human. Paradoxically, the acquisition of language in human beings relies first of all, not on an *addition* to animal endowments, but a *subtraction* from them.

## 2) The Question

The second dimension is that of *the question*. The signifier holds open the zone of something unknown, discovered in the excessive overflow of the imago in the Other. Indeed, it is no accident that on the level of its most elementary structure the signifier is itself composed of an image and some excess or surplus. The image furnishes the material body of the signifier, and the excess is the question about the directionality of its meaning, the question of the signified. This view of the matter suggests how the primordial question of the Other is always and implicitly repeated with every signifier. What most distinguishes Lacan's view of language and its function is that meaning can never be fully stabilized, that a question not only can but always implicitly *is* posed by every entry into language. As Lacan never tires of emphasizing, it is always possible to ask, "yes, I heard what you said to me, but what is it that you really want by saying it?"

At this point, we might venture a partial explanation of how this intimation of the question of the Other is literally inscribed in the infant's speech. I'm thinking of the phonemic repetition that is so characteristic of parental names across many languages: ma-ma, pa-pa. Roman Jakobson famously suggested of this repetition that the second phoneme functions to indicate that the first is to be taken as no mere sound but rather as a *signifier*. The Lacanian view fully endorses Jakobson's point, though might also be taken to expand upon it. We are accustomed to thinking of

26 Quotation from interview, Savage-Rumbaugh 2012.

this elementary *Nachträglichkeit* of meaning as a matter of retroactively specifying the intention, buttoning it down in the way that the last words of a sentence typically establish *après coup* the meaning of the opening phrase. But what if we are also to recognize in the infant's phonemic repetition—ma-ma—a posing of the question of what is unknown in the Other? When the second sounding of the phoneme indicates that the first is a signifier, the effect is also to open a potential question about what exactly it means. In this way, the doubling of the phoneme rehearses the originary partition of the Other, the division in the *Nebenmensch* remarked by Freud that posits one portion of the "perceptual complex" as corresponding to imaginary form and another portion that escapes registration in the specular image and that remains wholly enigmatic, an open question. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in Chinese, a language that shares the "ma-ma" of English and many other tongues, the phoneme "ma," with appropriate alteration of the tonal pronunciation, has two very different significations. In the first case, it functions to signify "mother." In the second case, sounded with a different tone and available for being appended to most any phrase, it functions to announce the interrogative mood. In this second employment, "ma" becomes the indicator *par excellence* of a question.

## 3) The Wall of the Law.

The third dimension is relevant to the distinction between the little Other of the fellow human being and the big Other of the symbolic code. When the signifier is stabilized by the network of an elaborated symbolic order, the separation from the neighbor-Thing is reinforced. The subject is protected from the neighbor-Thing by the "wall of the law."<sup>27</sup> This perspective is audible in a question posed by Slavoj Žižek, apropos Lacan's distance from Levinas: "What if the ultimate function of the Law is not to enable us not to forget the neighbor, to retain our proximity to the neighbor, but, on the contrary, to keep the neighbor at a proper distance, to serve as a kind of protective wall against the monstrosity of the neighbor?"<sup>28</sup> To in this way identify the elementary function of the signifier with an *Aufhebung* of the enigmatic neighbor-Thing, reinforced by the wall of the law, merely reposes of the basic terms of Lacan's paternal metaphor in which the Name of the Father is substituted for the Desire of the Mother. In fact, it becomes clear how Lacan's notion of the Thing stands at the core of his rewriting of the central pillar of Freud's theory, that of the Oedipus Complex. To be sure, the result is to center the origin of the subject upon a *complex*, but shifts the terms from the *Oedipus Komplex* to the *Komplex der Nebenmensch*.

27 In his "Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" Lacan refers not to the "wall of the law" but the "wall of language." Lacan 2006, p. 233.

28 Žižek 2005, p. 163.

## Anxiety and Freedom

Taking these three points together returns us to Heidegger. In particular, it becomes possible to see how the Lacanian Thing is relevant not only to the Heideggerian essay by that title but even more profoundly to the cardinal notion that underlies all of Heidegger's thought: that of the disclosive field of *die Lichtung*, the lighted clearing of Being. What Lacan theorizes in his notion of *das Ding* is not merely reminiscent of Heidegger's open horizon of revelation, *it is in a crucial respect coincident with it*. The openness of the open is traced by Lacan back to the enigma of the Other, the way in which the Other fundamentally embodies a question. What Heidegger thinks as the very being of *Dasein*, that being for which, in its being, its being remains a question, is distributed by Lacan across the gap of the subject's relation to an Other under whose gaze the question first arises. Moreover, insofar as the signifier functions to mark that space of the questionable, the being of the subject is an open question that radically relies on the open margin of signifier. The subject, as Lacan repeats time and again, is represented by a signifier for another signifier.

How, then, to link this discussion with the problematic of freedom? The connection becomes more palpable when we consider the contrast between the Heideggerian and Lacanian treatments of anxiety, the affect that for Heidegger is the privileged index of *Dasein*'s free potentiality for being.

Whatever one's larger judgment of Heidegger's thought, it's hard not to admire the conceptual elegance of his account. In anxiety, *Dasein* comes face to face with its own pure possibility. Anxiety is the dizziness of *Dasein*'s raw exposure—at once and in its totality—to the lighting of Being. Yet such pure exposure to presencing *is* *Dasein*. The elegance of Heidegger's definition of anxiety thus consists primarily in the way that it neatly certifies *Dasein*'s wholeness from out of its own being. Because anxiety is grounded in nothing but *Dasein*'s encounter with itself, the essential mineness of *Dasein*, the *Jemeinigkeit* of existential identity that Heidegger so stresses from the outset, comes to function as its own guarantee.<sup>29</sup> It is for this reason, as Heidegger puts it, that “anxiety individualizes *Dasein* and thus discloses it as ‘*solus ipse*’.”<sup>30</sup>

For Lacan, however, it is the very self-containedness of Heidegger's conception that is the problem. Where the Heideggerian account provides a special satisfaction by means of finding in anxiety the challenge that *Dasein* poses to itself, anxiety for Lacan reflects the subject's primordial alienation in the Other, the fact that the path by which the subject comes

29 Despite his otherwise critical appraisal of Descartes, Heidegger's view of anxiety as an affect that displays in a privileged way the essential being of *Dasein*, that *Dasein*'s very abyssal uncertainty is what certifies its wholeness, enacts an echo of Descartes' own approach, for which it is the capacity of the cogito to doubt that ultimately undergirds its unshakeable self-certainty.

30 Heidegger 1962, p. 233.

to itself necessarily begins outside itself. The problem is not unnerving intimacy but unavoidable *extimacy*.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, Lacan's different conception on this crucial point arguably enables him to be truer to Heidegger's vision than Heidegger himself, at least with regard to Heidegger's rejection of existence in favor of *ek-sistence*. As Heidegger himself emphasizes, most clearly in his disavowal of Sartre's existential voluntarism, the change of prefix is meant to emphasize that *Dasein* is in some essential way outside and/or beyond itself. It is not accidental, then, that Lacan seizes with special enthusiasm on the altered spelling of *ek-sistence*, as it captures precisely the elementally *ek-centric* structure that Lacan wants crucially to assert. The subject comes to itself only by means of the detour through the Other. At the same time, Lacan affords a new angle of view on another central Heideggerian theme, that of *Gerede*, the idle chatter that enables everyday *Dasein* to evade its ownmost potentiality for being. In mundane small talk, *Dasein* loses itself in formulaic banter about the weather, the box scores, the police blotter, local gossip, etc. What Lacan adds to this Heideggerian insight is an insistence that what is covered over by idle talk is first and foremost the abyssal character of the Other.

We also begin to see how the margin of freedom emerges in a Lacanian conception of it. For Lacan, the alienating, inauthentic discourse of everydayness, what Lacan in his early work called “empty speech,” is merely one species of the more general phenomenon of the symbolic Law—call it the “soft power” face of the big Other—which taken broadly comprises all the ways in which the open horizon of signification is controlled by routinized linkages between signifiers and signifieds. The fundamental function of the Law is to provide a defense against the vertiginous question of the Other-Thing. When the subject contends a break with the Law of the big Other that regulates the defile of the signifier, the subject is re-confronted by the force of the real that resounds in the question. Confronting the gaps and inconsistencies in the law, engaging its failures in ways that push the subject toward the conclusion that the big Other doesn't know, or even doesn't exist, has the effect of animating an unsuspected richness of the signifier, alive not merely along the less traveled by-roads of signification but even in the play of nonsense. The repressed of *das Ding* returns in the poetics of the impossible and the absurd. It is in this way, I submit, that we should interpret Lacan's twin claims that “speech is able to recover the debt that it engenders”<sup>32</sup> and that “jouissance must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of desire.”<sup>33</sup>

31 Lacan introduces his neologism of the “*extimate*” precisely in his elaboration of the Thing. See Lacan 1992, p. 139.

32 Lacan 2006, p. 144.

33 Lacan 2006, p. 324.

## Revelation vs. Reverberation

At this point, we could easily enlarge upon the proximity of Heidegger's celebration of poetry to Lacan's insistence on the polyvalence of the signifier, comparable, as Lacan says, to the multiple staves of a musical score.<sup>34</sup> But let us instead risk posing another question about the difference between the two thinkers. The key for highlighting that difference is to see how, despite strong currents of his thought that lead in precisely contrary directions, Heidegger might still be characterized as a thinker of *revelation*. Despite his insistence that Dasein is always equiprimordially in the truth and untruth, or that revelation is always counterbalanced by concealment, Heidegger's conception of Dasein's disclosive clearing continually evokes the promise of something like a shining-forth of revelation, the flashing of some extensive coming-to-presence.<sup>35</sup> Dasein's disclosive potential as Heidegger conceives it tends toward something like a "full screen" appearance. What we have here, I submit, is perhaps the capital expression of Heidegger's phenomenological point of departure. It is a commitment to the sweep of the phenomenal field which in turn undergirds the emphasis on Dasein's being-as-a-whole. The Heideggerian clearing thus tends to suggest an open stage upon which some completely new tableau might unfold. The Greek temple is thus thought by Heidegger to clear the open space for the meeting of the "four-fold" of earth and sky, mortals and divinities. In another context, that of his essay on "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger champions meditative thinking that eschews the flattening influence of technological "enframing" and thereby opens the possibility of a entirely altered apprehension of the Rhine River. It is tempting to hear something of the same evocation of the revelatory whole when, giving free play to the verbal gerund, Heidegger elsewhere suggests that "the Thing things world."<sup>36</sup> This general orientation toward an open canvas upon which something akin to an epiphany may suddenly unfurl itself disposes Heidegger's entire reflection on Being in the direction of a fundamental receptiveness on the part of Dasein, oriented, as he repeatedly says, towards some gathered wholeness.

One wonders whether it isn't this tropism toward a revelatory shining-forth that animated Heidegger's claim toward the end of his life

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34 Lacan 2006, p. 419.

35 It is my contention here that the tension between Heidegger's emphasis on the equiprimordially of truth and untruth, and on the ineluctable couplet of revealing and concealing, on the one hand, and his tendency toward evoking a revelatory presencing that somehow claims Dasein's being in its wholeness, on the other, marks a crucial point at which Heidegger's outlook appears to be at odds with itself, a kind of unacknowledged fissure that runs through the entirety of his thinking. While it is especially prominent and problematic in the compass of *Being and Time*, this tension can also be discerned in Heidegger's more mature period.

36 Heidegger 1975, p. 181ff.

that "only a God can save us." One might also ask whether this resonance of his phenomenological point of departure informed his disastrous flirtation with Nazism. Perhaps what above all seduced Heidegger into a complicity with the rising tide of fascism was less, as he himself claimed, a matter of seeing an opportunity to steer a dangerous movement in a more constructive direction, than it was a shared hope for a radical renewal, a complete remaking of the German *Vo/k* that would enable the dawning an entirely new day.

The keynote of the Lacanian approach is strikingly different. Already discernible in the original text of Freud, the encounter with *das Ding* always wavers in the secondary margin of some other, more definite apprehension. The Thing is an unaccountable surplus that overflows a given contour, it is the unassimilable excess of a primary presentation. This characteristic of the Thing as essentially a marginal phenomenon, something that flickers in the periphery, becomes even more prominent in Lacan's work after the 7<sup>th</sup> seminar, when the trace of the real is associated with impediment (of the stain, the blindspot, the mote in the eye) or with inconsistency (the point of gap, of failure, of split). Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine that Lacan's increasing emphasis on this peripheral, exceptional character of the pivotal detail is a key part of what moves him away from the reference to *das Ding* toward reliance on the notion of *objet a*, his mature expression of the object-cause of desire.<sup>37</sup> The *objet a* is ineluctably the partial object, the object that is always only apprehended obliquely, the object that is essentially accessible only by looking awry.

All of which returns us to the cardinal lesson of Freud's method of analyzing dreams, in which what is crucial can be grasped only by first deliberately refusing the whole picture in order to focus on the overlooked details, by ignoring the "full screen" of an inclusive sweep of presencing in favor of the strange tidbit, the almost-nothing that changes everything. By missing this crucial distinction, Heidegger's fundamental disposition might be said to incline toward the body of fantasy that structures ideology and to miss the discrepant detail, the part-object, that marks the site of the true opening in the wall of the law.

Despite the many ways in which the theoretical concerns of Heidegger and Lacan can be seen to overlap, the implications of this difference are hard to overstate. Heidegger tends to identify freedom with the very openness of the clearing, which in turn is tied to the general posture Dasein chooses in relation to that openness. In the

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37 Despite the importance Lacan obviously attributes to *das Ding* when he first introduces the idea in the seminar on Ethics, he very soon and almost completely drops mention of the term. It is absent even from the second half of the seminar and is referred to only a handful of times in subsequent years (though, it should be noted, those few references are quite significant). My claim here, presented in extreme brevity, is that the problematic of *das Ding* comes to be spoken for in Lacan's later work by the concept of *objet a*.

context of *Being and Time*, that relation is construed as a posturing of will—that of anticipatory resoluteness—for which there is a deeply satisfying confluence of terms between disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*) and resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*). In later texts, Heidegger qualifies this reliance on willing, moving toward the notion of a willing suspension of will, a will-not-to-will. In his mature work, Heidegger further backpedals from his early embrace of the will, seeking to radicalize the self-imposed restraint of willing by means of his appeal to *Gelassenheit*. As a positive non-willing that consists in a radical letting-go, or letting-be, *Gelassenheit* would seem to envisage a form of ever-more completely unwillful release toward disclosure.<sup>38</sup> From start to finish, however, the red thread of continuity would seem to be a matter of Dasein's posturing itself appropriately to receive something like revelation, with the further assumption that such revealing is a coming-to-presence, at least momentarily, *as a whole*.

Read in the strongest way, the Lacanian approach is diametrically opposed insofar as the aim is not to receive a revelation but precisely the opposite: to be brought up short by a knot in the otherwise seamless fabric of signification, a glitch in its smooth functioning. Here we encounter the essence of the Lacanian notion of cause as what doesn't work.<sup>39</sup> The confrontation with this recalcitrant remainder delivers the subject over to a sense of a negative space, the sense not of what appears but precisely what doesn't appear—a shadow of *das Ding*. Where the Heideggerian ethic abjures us to hold ourselves out into the nothing in order to receive a revelatory epiphany, the psychoanalytic counsel positions us toward an object that is taken as a signifier without a signified, in the process ushering us into a sublime lack that animates the object from within. It is this process by which, for Lacan, the object is raised to the dignity of *das Ding*.

The difference at stake here is audible in a passage from the seminar on "Transference" where Lacan contrasts the gods of revelation with the god of the Word. The pagan deities are associated with revelation: "the notion of god as the height of revelation, of *numen*, as real shining and appearance." The Judeo-Christian deity, by contrast, is identified with Logos. The shift, we might say, is away from the promise of positive revealment, a sort of "innocence" of appearances in which what is real must ultimately show itself, toward a sublime summons that refuses to specify itself. Lacan attempts to emphasize this point in the sixteenth seminar, for our purposes significantly entitled "From an Other to the other," when he analyzes the enigmatic character of Yahweh's

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<sup>38</sup> A consummately articulate exposition of this transition is to be found in Bret Davis's study on *Heidegger and the Will: On The Way to Gelassenheit*.

<sup>39</sup> Lacan 1981, p. 22.

response to Moses's desire to know his name: *Eyeh Asher Eyeh*. Lacan insists that we refuse to read the divine name in the manner prescribed by Greek metaphysics: "I am what I am"—a reading that points us toward the self-coincidence of Being, the pure *ipseity* of God—in favor of sticking closer to the sense of the original Hebrew: "I will be what I will be"—a rendering that suggests a non-coincidence that corresponds to a temporal scansion. We are thereby invited to identify the voice from out of the burning bush with the act of speech itself, about which it is always necessary to distinguish the subject of enunciation from the subject of the enunciated. The divine is here identified with the subject of pure enunciation that foreswears all fixity of the enunciated. The upshot, as the Judaic tradition has it, is that the divine power is contacted less effectively in the achievement of naming than in respecting its very failure or refusal to be named.

These observations can be taken to frame a final brief comment relevant to a theme that is almost totally absent from Heidegger's meditations on being and, we must admit, not as much commented upon in Lacan as it might be: the way in which the thematic of *das Ding* points us back to the crucial importance of the relation of the little

Other, the fellow human being, in so far as it can become the site of an event of singularity. For Heidegger, the little other tends overwhelmingly to be lost in the blur of *das Man*. Not only is the whole problem of the Other introduced conspicuously late in the argument of *Being and Time*, but the concept of *Mitsein* with which Heidegger thinks the Other tends to emphasize a seamless connection, a dimension of Dasein's insertion into the integral wholeness of worldhood, and thereby to obviate the uncanny potential of the encounter with the Other. By contrast, the very mainspring of psychoanalysis, the linchpin of the transference, turns about a reanimation of the Thingly character of an individual Other. The efficacy of psychoanalysis crucially depends upon the power of the analyst to evoke a heightened sense of a figure that remains unknown and inaccessible. An indispensable condition of analysis consists in the extent to which the analyst impersonates *das Ding*.

The fuller implications of this relinking to the *Nebenmensch* in order to restore something of the original uncanniness of the Thing that inhabits it point us toward Lacan's references to love. These references increase during the final phase of Lacan's teaching, devoted more and more to the confrontation with the real, and deserve to be taken as a new gloss on Freud's classical assertion that the love active in the transference is to be taken as fully real. This dimension of love in the real enables us to understand Lacan's enigmatic dictum that "only love allows *jouissance* to condescend to desire."<sup>40</sup> It is by this path that we are delivered over

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<sup>40</sup> Lacan 2014, p. 179.



into what is probably the ultimate paradox of love, one deeply relevant to our theme, that according to which the love bond sometimes joked about as a willing submission to slavery, may at the same time offer the most profound experience of freedom. What is at stake is a definition of love reminiscent of the words of Hadewijch, the mystical Beguine, with which we started. "Soul," she writes, "is a way for the passage of God from his depths into his liberty; and God is a way for the passage of the soul into its liberty, that is, into his inmost depths, which cannot be touched except by the soul's abyss." Hadewijch here ties freedom to love, and love to the embrace of something profoundly unknown. We hear something of the same in a particularly suggestive passage from Fichte, in which he claims that "true love [...] rejects any and every object in order that it may launch into the infinite [...It is] a desire for something altogether unknown, the existence of which is disclosed solely by the need for it, by a discomfort, and by a void that is in search of whatever will fill it." <sup>41</sup>

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41 Quoted by Fink 1983, p. 144.