

The problem of interiority in Freud and Lacan

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ABSTRACT

The problem of interiority constitutes one of the fundamental problems of modernity. Once the decision is made to ground human experience within the locus of subjectivity, how is it possible to establish connection with an object (Gegenstand) that “stands against” and is somehow independent of human subjectivity—what Lacan refers to as “the real”? A Lacanian reading of Freud’s Project for a Scientific Psychology places the problem of interiority in a radically new, yet continuous light. While Freud begins with a conception of reality interior to the subject, Lacan offers a way out of the traditional problem of interiority through a nuanced account of sublimation. Lacan’s “way out” consists of an oblique passage from the “symbolic order” to the real – through “the zone Oedipus entered having scratched out his eyes.”

Key word: Freud, Lacan, Interiority, Unconscious, Language, Symbolic, *Das Ding*

1. Introduction

“...[We] have all believed that the spidery mind trapped things in its web, covered them with a white spit and slowly swallowed them, reducing them to its own substance.... The simplest and plainest among us vainly looked for something solid, something not just mental, but would encounter everywhere only a soft and very genteel mist: themselves (Sartre, 1970, p. 4).”

According to Heidegger, “The whole of modern metaphysics taken together ... maintains itself within the interpretation of what it is to be and of truth that was prepared by Descartes (Heidegger, 1977, p. 127).” Despite Heidegger’s tendency to paint the history of Western metaphysics in rather broad strokes, this linking of modernity with the philosophy of Descartes has come to be commonly accepted. Descartes sought to establish an Archimedean point upon which philosophy, viewed as the paradigmatic epistemic discipline, could erect an edifice of scientific knowledge. The *fundamentum inconcussum* upon which the Cartesian metaphysic was erected was the self-evident certainty of the *Cogito*. Hence the famous Cartesian dictum: *Cogito ergo Sum*.

But the question remains as to whether or not Descartes was ever able to successfully extricate his thought from the exclusive domain of the *Cogito*. The classic statement of this problem is located in the famous ‘wax example’ in *Meditation II*. After having placed the wax next to the fire, the wax melts. All of the “secondary qualities” have disappeared, leaving only its “primary quality” of *extension*. But to view the wax example as simply a lesson in primary and secondary qualities is a mistake. The importance of the wax example lies in the following:

It remains then for me to concede that I do not grasp what this wax is through the imagination; rather I perceive it through the mind alone.... I need to realize that the perception of the wax is neither a seeing, nor a touching, nor an imagining. Nor has it ever been, even though it previously seemed so. Rather it is an inspection on the part of the mind alone (Descartes, 1993, p. 68).

However, Descartes has one more surprise to offer. Not only is the wax known through the mind *alone*, he adds “I manifestly know that nothing can be perceived more easily and more evidently than my own mind (Descartes, 1993, p. 69).” For Descartes, knowledge is grounded in the self-certainty of the subject – the *Res Cogitans*. Robert B. Pippin has characterized this situation nicely in the following: “This ... attempt at a new beginning does leave us with the ungrounded ‘seemings’ of our mental life, but by a rigorous attention to the internal characteristics of such ideational content, we can securely re-establish a connection with reality.... (Pippin, 1991, p. 24).”

But it is highly questionable whether or not Descartes was able to escape his subjectivist orientation and re-connect with the external world. The Cartesian tendency to situate knowledge within the interior of the *Cogito* was given greater expression by Kant by means of a full-blown transcendental architectonic. In response to

Hume's skeptical doubt concerning our ability to derive "objective necessity" from the world via experience alone, Kant erected a transcendental theory of knowledge. From a Kantian perspective, our *phenomenal* knowledge is a product of pure intuitions and pure categories of the understanding—a knowledge constituted within the domain of transcendental subjectivity. What lies beyond the realm of the phenomenal, we simply cannot know. Kant referred to it as *das Unbekannt = X*. For Kant, "Reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own (Kant, 1961, p. 20)." But as one insightful critic has stated: "The Cartesian demand for fully adequate representations of reality cannot be fulfilled. Reality reveals itself to us as such precisely where it reveals itself to us as surpassing all our forms of representation (Harries, 1973, pp. 39-40)."

We can see from this brief introduction that "the problem of interiority" constitutes one of the fundamental problems of modernity. Once the decision is made to ground human experience within the locus of subjectivity, how is it then possible to establish a connection with an object that "stands against" (*Gegenstand*) and is somehow independent of human subjectivity—something which one might refer to as "the real"? In the following, I will attempt to show how a Lacanian reading of Freud's earliest investigations into the structure of human subjectivity enables one to view the Cartesian problem of interiority in a radically new, yet continuous light. My analysis will conclude with a brief look at a Freudian-Lacanian analysis of sublimation as a possible "way out" of the problem of interiority.

2. The Problem of Interiority in Freud's *Project For A Scientific Psychology*

The nucleus of ψ is connected with the paths by which endogenous quantities of excitation ascend. Without excluding the possibility of these paths being connected with ϕ , we must nevertheless hold to our original assumption that a direct pathway leads from the interior of the body to the ψ neurons.... [I]n this fact lies the mainspring of the psychical mechanism (Freud, 1895, pp. 315-316).

Freud's investigation of the subject can be viewed in some sense as being carried out in the tradition of Descartes. Freud also advocated a radical return to the internal structure of the subject: Normally, there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, our own ego. This ego appears to be something autonomous and unitary, marked off distinctively from everything else. That such an appearance is deceptive, and that on the contrary the ego is continued inward, without any sharp delimitation, into an unconscious mental entity which we designate as the id and for which it serves as a kind of façade (Freud, 1930, pp 12-13).

Here Freud makes reference to the ego as a façade, or peripheral entrance, to the unconscious. He also mentions examples of pathological states "in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly (Freud, 1930, p.13)." By drawing upon his vast experience with such diagnoses as mania and neurosis, Freud explains that there exists "an intention of making oneself independent of the external world by seeking satisfaction in internal psychic processes.... (Freud, 1930, p. 27)."¹ However, the suggestive power of Freud lies in the manner in which he is able to take his work with the "mentally ill" and apply it to the "normal" behaviors of contemporary civilization. As Freud says: "It is asserted, however, that each one of us behaves in some one respect like a paranoiac, corrects some aspect of the world which is unbearable to him by the construction of a wish and introduces this delusion into reality (Freud, 1930, p. 28)." But Freud's tendency to apply the psychoanalytic insights gleaned from individual patients to larger cultural behaviors contains a fundamental philosophical problem: In an individual neurosis we take as our starting point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment which is assumed to be "normal." For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; *it would have to be found elsewhere* (Freud, 1930, p. 9).

At the time of writing *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud viewed the self as consisting of three dimensions: the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Of these three dimensions, Freud viewed the id as the most powerful. While discussing the censoring function of the super-ego, Freud says: In the severity of its commands and prohibitions ... it takes insufficient account of the resistances against obeying them—of the instinctual strength of the id.... It, too, does not trouble itself enough about the facts of the mental functioning of human beings. It issues a command and does not ask whether it is possible for people to obey it. On the contrary, it assumes that a man's ego is psychologically capable of anything that is required of it, that his ego has unlimited master over his id. This is a mistake; and even in what are known as normal people the id cannot be controlled beyond certain limits (Freud, 1930, p. 90).

In order to understand Freud's claim, it is necessary to return to some of his earliest investigations. The *Project of a Scientific Psychology* stands as a seminal text within the total Freudian corpus.² It was intended to be his initial attempt to establish a comprehensive science of subjectivity based upon his recent discoveries in neurology – “a sort of economics of nerve-force (Freud, 1957, p.123).” Freud viewed this nerve-force as composed of a quantity of psychical energy which he designated as $Q\acute{h}$. $Q\acute{h}$ is made up of three types, or systems, of neurons: *phi*, *psi*, and *omega*. First, external stimuli are received through a protective barrier, or *Reizschutz*, and activate the “permeable” system of *phi* neurons. Energy from the *phi* system then flows into the main system of neurons, the *psi* system, where it is enriched by “endogenous stimuli” stemming from the somatic drives. According to Freud, all organisms, in an effort to seek a level of homeostasis, will discharge excess energy: “the principle of neuronal inertia [is] a contrivance for neutralizing the reception of $Q\acute{h}$ by giving it off (Freud, 1895, p. 296).” In higher functioning organisms, both *phi* and *psi* energy is transferred into the *omega* system which, for Freud, functions as the level of consciousness. Two points should be emphasized: the discharge of energy to achieve homeostasis, and the primacy of the *psi* system within the basic neurological structure of the organism. As one commentator has stated: [T]he higher organism has a strong conscious bias toward the discharge of energy. The importance of somatic drives—instincts—in Freud's model cannot be over emphasized. Unlike energy from the external world, there was no protective barrier or *Reizschutz* for these internal drives, and thus their full force has access to the entire psychic apparatus. Freud described the consequences in a passage that he underlined for emphasis: “ ψ is at the mercy of Q (energy from somatic drives) (McCarley, 1998, p. 117).³”

In order to better appreciate the unique manner in which a human being functions endopsychically, we must understand how Freud envisions the “primary functioning” of the nervous system. According to Freud, “A primary nervous system makes use of this $Q\acute{h}$ which it has thus acquired, by giving it off through a connecting path ... and in that way keeps it free from stimulus. This discharge represents the primary function of the nervous system (Freud, 1895, p. 296).” The term that Freud uses to name this process of displacement via a connecting path or “network of facilitations” is *Bahnungen*. According to Freud, neurons become “cathected” as a result of being charged with $Q\acute{h}$. *Phi* neurons, being permeable, remain largely unaffected; but *psi* neurons, on the other hand, are impermeable and, thus, are “loaded with resistance and hold back $Q\acute{h}$ (Freud, 1895, p. 300).” Freud describes this process of facilitation in the following way: Here we are almost involuntarily reminded of the endeavor of the nervous system, maintained through every modification, to avoid being burdened by $Q\acute{h}$ or to keep that burden as small as possible.... It now avoids, partly at least, being *filled* with $Q\acute{h}$ (cathexis) by setting up *facilitations*. It will be seen then, that *facilitations serve as the primary function of the nervous system* (Freud, 1895, p. 301).

What does Freud mean by this term “facilitations”? Facilitations are connective links that are established between *psi* neurons in an attempt to bridge the flow of $Q\acute{h}$ in a way that “facilitates” the homeostatic balance of the organism. The particular manner in which the flow of $Q\acute{h}$ is facilitated over the course of time can become fixed. In other words, facilitations can become sedimented, or codified, according to the repetitive structure of past facilitations. Freud expresses it this way: The facilitation, however, is formed in a manner which allows a deeper insight into the development of ψ . Hitherto we have learned to know of ψ neurons being influenced through ϕ and through endogenous paths of conduction; but the different ψ neurons were cut off from one another by contact-barriers with strong resistances. Now there is a basic law of association through simultaneity, which operates in the case of pure ψ activity, of reproductive remembering, and which is the foundation of all links between ψ neurons.... [T]he quantitative cathexis of a ψ neuron, α , passes into another, β if sometime α and β have been simultaneously cathected.... Thus a contact barrier has been facilitated through the simultaneous cathexis of α - β . It follows in terms of our theory that $Q\acute{h}$ passes more easily from a cathected neurone than an uncathected one (Freud, 1895, p. 319).

The traces of past facilitations are, for Freud, what constitute memory. Given the dominant role that the *psi* system assumes in the overall psychic functioning of the human being, the mnemonic images stemming from these facilitations can take on an almost exclusive role in determining the awareness of the individual. In a quasi-autonomous manner, these intra-facilitations, or “side-cathexes,” of the *psi* system can eclipse the function once provided by the external stimuli of the *psi* system.⁴ As one commentator has stated: “[T]he nerves constitute the system of transmission and the reception that define sensibility itself. The nervous system is the *media* as it were of subjectivity (Sussman, 1982, p. 161).” Freud describes this neurological functioning in the following way: What, then does the facilitation in the ψ neurons depend on? According to psych[ological] knowledge, the memory of

an experience, (that is, its continuing operative power) depends on a factor which is called the magnitude of the impression and the frequency with which the same impression is repeated. Translated into theory: Facilitation depends on the $Q\acute{h}$ which passes through the neurone in the excitatory process and on the number of repetitions of the process. From this we see, then, the $Q\acute{h}$ is the operative factor and that quantity plus facilitation resulting from $Q\acute{h}$ are at the same time something that can replace $Q\acute{h}$ (Freud, 1895, pp. 300-301).

That one's awareness could lie almost exclusively within the domain of facilitations of the *psi* system is at first glance a rather strange notion. Perhaps Freud was aware of this when he wrote in a letter to Fleiss that he wanted "to extract from psychopathology what may be of benefit to normal psychology (Freud, 1957, p. 123)."⁵ But doesn't Freud's account of the relationship between *phi*, *psi* and *omega* systems stand opposed to what we commonly believe? For example, our naïve view might go something like this: The *phi* neurons would provide stimuli that were in some sense a reflection of the external world. These *phi* neurons would, in turn, stimulate *psi* neurons. But if the initial *phi* stimuli is being transformed, or even eclipsed, by the *psi* system, then the question necessarily arises as to whether or not the *psi* system is, in fact, truly indicative of an external reality. As Freud says: "We may assume that paths lead directly, and independently of ϕ , from the brain to the interior of the body.... The filling of ω neurons within $Q\acute{h}$ can no doubt only proceed from ψ , since we do not wish to admit any direct link between this ... system and ϕ (Freud, 1895, pp. 303, 311)." In fact, Freud's "reality principle" is often invoked to provide a solution to this very problem by proving an external standard or "indication of reality" to which an organism must ultimately comply. But is this an accurate description of Freud's reality principle?

Interestingly, Freud is somewhat ambivalent in his treatment of the reality principle. In some instances, Freud will speak of the reality principle in terms of an independent, external benchmark to which internal ideas must be accountable. But at other times, Freud will emphasize the primacy of the ψ system.⁶ Peter Gay, in his Freud biography, explains this issue in the following way: What Freud called the "primary process," the collection of untamed mental energies lodged in the mind from the beginning, is still entirely under the sway of the pleasure principle: it wants gratification, heedlessly, downright brutally, with no patience for thought or delay. But with years of development, the mind manages to superimpose a "secondary process," which takes account of reality; it regulates mental functioning less passionately and more efficiently by introducing thinking, calculating, [and] the capacity to postpone satisfaction for the sake of enjoying them later. Freud warned against overestimating the influence of the secondary process, the primary process retains its persistent greed throughout life (Gay, 1988, p. 131).

At this juncture, a distinction must be made here between "reality" and "the real." The term "reality" should be applied to that which we collectively take to be real, i.e. the secondary process, but whose ultimate meaning must be traced to the interior functioning of the *psi* system. The "real," on the other hand, would be that which stands outside of the path of secondary facilitations as something wholly *other*. Freud intimates this view when he distinguishes between "*things* [as] residues which evade being judged ... [and] the secondary process [as] a repetition of the original ψ passage (Freud, 1895, p. 334)." Likewise, at the end of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud will somewhat cryptically distinguish between "*psychical* reality and material reality (Freud, 1965, pp. 658-659)."⁷ Stated in the language that Freud was using at the time of writing the *Project*, "the external Q of objects cannot be expressed in ψ by psychical $Q\acute{h}$ (Freud, 1895, p. 362)." Freud states the matter powerfully in his famous paper entitled *Negation*: It is no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well. It is, we see, once more a question of *internal* and *external*. What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; what is *real* is also there outside.... In order to understand this step forward, we must recollect that all presentations originate from perceptions and are repetitions of them.... [T]hinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there. The first and foremost aim of all reality-testing is not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *re-find* such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there (Freud, 1925, pp. 237-238).⁸

3. Lacan's Appropriation of Freud's Project

Let us have no illusions; as far as psychology is concerned, nothing has been achieved so far that is superior to Freud's *Entwurf*.... It is here that one first advance in darkness to that *Wirklichkeit*.... It is Freud's first skirmish with the hyperbole of reality.... (Lacan, 1997, pp. 30, 29, 37).

Lacan will further develop the problem of interiority through a creative appropriation of Freud's thought. A large share of Lacan's lectures entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is dedicated to a "rereading" of Freud's *Project*. Lacan begins by identifying the "problematic character" of reality in Freud's thought: It is on the road to the investigation of reality that we find ourselves as analysts, and it leads us a long way from something that can be expressed under the category of wholeness. It leads us to a special area, that of psychic reality, which presents itself to us with the problematic character of a previously unequalled order (Lacan, 1997, p. 21).

For Lacan, Freud "begins with a reality that is somewhere inside himself (Lacan, 1997, p. 26)." In order to fully understand his claim, we must first understand Lacan's use of the distinction that Freud makes between the "primary" and "secondary" processes. From a Lacanian perspective, there exists a "certain ambiguity" within the oppositional distinction that Freud proposes: [O]n what theoretically is the control of the pleasure principle exercised? Precisely on perception, and it is here that one finds the originality of [Freud's] contribution. The primary process ... tends to be exercised towards an identity of perception. It doesn't matter whether it is real or hallucinated, such an identity will always tend to be established. If it isn't lucky enough to coincide with reality, it will be hallucinated. The risk is in the possibility of the primary process winning out. On the other hand, what does the secondary process tend toward? ...It tends toward an identity of thought. What does that mean? It means that the interior functioning of the psychic apparatus ... will conduct a series of tests or detours that ... realizes itself autonomously in its own sphere, theoretically, without expecting anything from the outside. In this preliminary approach, thought ought to appear on the level of the reality principle.... But it is by no means the case, since as described by Freud, this process is in itself and by nature unconscious.... [N]othing that takes place on the level of these tests ... is perceptible as such (Lacan, 1997, pp. 31-32).

Lacan is appropriating the Freudian topology of the *phi*, *psi*, and *omega* systems in order to emphasize the importance of that which is anterior to conscious awareness. From a Lacanian perspective, there exists a "binding together" and a "crossing over" between the pleasure and the reality principle because the ψ system organizes and transforms "whatever reaches it from the outside (Lacan, 1997, p. 40)." As we learned from our earlier discussion of Freud's *Project*, one option is for Q_1 to simply be discharged. Lacan, however, will emphasize a process of linguistic transformation that is similar to what Freud referred to as a "side-cathexis." Lacan argues that ψ energy undergoes a process of "extension" through the establishment of *Bahnungen* – a chain, or sequence, of symbolic transformations that allow for the energy to be articulated. These *Bahnungen*, in turn, form the structural network that constitutes the secondary process – the "rectifying test" that enable the subject to move beyond the immediate data of psychic awareness. However, a problem arises in that this model of psychic functioning acts, according to Lacan, as a primary defense, against the real: The important point here is that everything that happens here offers the paradox of being in the same place as that within which the principle of articulation by the *Bahnung* reigns, the same place, in which the whole hallucinatory phenomenon of perception occurs, of that false reality to which the human organism is predestined. It is again in this same place that the processes oriented and dominated by reality are unconsciously formed.... (Lacan, 1997, p.41).⁹

Lacan's contribution to Freud's meta-psychology lies in the former's ability to identify the linguistic basis of Freud's enterprise. Lacan applies a Freudian twist to the Saussurean categories of *langue* and *parole*, resulting in a distinction between *unconscious structure* and *preconscious function*. For Lacan, this leads to a full-blown linguistic ontology: [Freud], nevertheless, understood and formulated admirable the distinction to be made between the operation of language as function – namely, the moment when it is articulated ... -- and the structure of language, as a result of those elements put in play in the unconscious are organized. In between, those coordinations are set up, those *Bahnungen*, that concatenation, that dominate its whole economy....[I]t is obvious that the things in the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all (Lacan, 1997, p. 45).

For Lacan, these unconsciousness thought processes are "only known to us through words ... [and] the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of language (Lacan, 1997, p. 32)." If *words*, then, are all that we have access to, then what becomes of the status of *things* – what we commonly think of as providing the external, objective referent of words? Here Lacan, again following Freud, makes an important

distinction. Yes, there are *things* with which we commonly interact. But these things, which Lacan refers to as *Sachen*, are strictly a function of the symbolic order: "a product ... governed by language ... always on the surface, always within the range of explanation (Lacan, 1997, p.45)." If we are necessarily committed to this symbolic order, does it make sense to talk about something that lies outside of the reach of the symbolic order? Lacan's answer is affirmative: "*Sache* and *Worte* are, therefore, closely linked; they form a couple. *Das Ding* is found somewhere else (Lacan, 1997, p. 45)."

Das Ding occupies a mysterious place within Lacan's ontology. Similar to the Kantian *Ding-an-Sich*, it is "the true secret ... [and] it only manages to affirm itself at the margin (Lacan, 1997, p. 46)." This is because Freud's metapsychology: [I]s dominated by a process of homeostasis, of isolation from reality.... Everything is done so that Q quantity is definitely blocked, stopped in relation to that which is supported by another quantity, the Q₁ quantity – the latter determines the level that distinguishes the ψ apparatus within the neuronics whole. For the *Entwurf* is, in fact, the theory of a neuronics apparatus in relation to which the organism remains exterior, just as much as the outside world (Lacan, 1997, pp. 46-47).

For Lacan, the reality principle does not lie within the symbolic relationships that constitute the secondary process. Reality is deeper than the reality principle. The true reality, the *real*, is the "excluded interior" that has not yet been filtered into the realm of the symbolic order. As Lacan says: "The Freudian project has caused the whole world to reenter us, has definitely put it back in its place, that is to say, in our body, and nowhere else (Lacan, 1997, p. 92)." But as human beings who dwell within the symbolic order, do we exist in a state of isolation from the real?

No, says Lacan. There is the possibility of "drawing close" to what he refers to as *das Ding*. *Das Ding*, for Lacan, stands outside of the dynamic system of references that constitute the signifying chain; it is "the real ... which is always in the same place (Lacan, 1997, p. 70)." However, Lacan's positing of *das Ding* introduces "an original division [in] the experience of reality (Lacan 1997, p.50)." As "a first outside," *das Ding* must be somehow found again. But, at the same time, Lacan is emphatic that as "the-beyond-the-signified ... it will never be found again (Lacan, 1997, pp. 54, 52)."

Fortunately, the loss of *das Ding* is not a *fait accompli*. According to Lacan, *das Ding* is able "to present itself – hit the bull's eye – to the extent that it becomes word (Lacan, 1997, p. 55)." The symbolic order hovers, or gravitates around *das Ding* and "reveals itself to be inextricably woven into it (Lacan, 1997, p. 57)." How is it that the symbolic order is able to reveal that which necessarily escapes it? Said differently, how is Lacan able to traverse the interiority of the symbolic order and connect with *das Ding*? This question leads to the notion of sublimation.

4. The Possibility of Sublimation

Sublimation is a way out by which the claims of the ego can be met without involving repression.... The task then is one of transferring the instincts into such directions that they cannot be frustrated by the outer world (Freud, 1959, p. 52, 1930, p. 26). The most general formula that I can give you of sublimation is the following: it raises an object – and I don't mind the suggestion of a play on word in the term I usea term used in chemistry ... to the dignity of *das Ding* (Lacan, 1997, p. 112).

My aim at this point is not to provide an exhaustive treatment of the complex notion of sublimation but simply to show how sublimation offers the possibility of a transition from the symbolic to the real. For Freud, sublimation remained a largely unexplored topic having to do with the displacement, or shifting, of the aim of libidinous energy into higher intellectual functions. Freud characterizes sublimation as a "vicissitude" because the object of the libidinal instinct is redirected or "deflected" through a movement from private desire to public exteriorization. In Freudian terms, the original trajectory of the biological urge is "bent" as the hypercathetic ego regulates libidinal impulses "the way the sun bends the pathways of comets (Freud, 1908, p. 161)." For Lacan sublimation also holds an important key to unlocking the secret of Freud's metapsychology: Freud didn't finish at a stroke the trail that he blazed for us One thing only alludes the possibility of the happy satisfaction of the instinct, and that is the notion of sublimation.... [T]he fundamental question ... is How is it possible? ...[S]ublimation is the satisfaction of the drive with a change of object.... (Lacan, 1997, pp. 88, 293).

For Lacan, it is necessary “to account for [sublimation in] its relation to what we are calling the Thing (Lacan, 1997, p.117).” How does this transformation of an object into a Thing occur? In order to understand this transformational process, we must briefly re-trace Lacan’s use of the model of neurological functioning that Freud presented in the *Project*. Lacan uses the term “flocculation” to describe the “crystallization into signifying units” that occurs as a result of the homeostatic functioning of the pleasure principle (See Lacan, 1997, pp. 118-119). The effect of flocculation is a signifying chain that causes us to encircle and bypass the Thing. What does it mean, then, to *raise* the object to the dignity of *das Ding*? In order for an object to be raised to “the dignity” of *das Ding*, is it somehow implied that such dignity was somehow already implicit in the object in latent form?

The answer, for Lacan, seems to be both yes and no. Clearly the object, prior to sublimation, cannot reflect the dignity of *das Ding*. However, Lacan tells us that “an approach to *Sublimierung* must begin with a recognition of the plasticity of the instincts (Lacan, 1997, p. 91).”

Instincts (*Triebe*), according to Lacan, “drift” (*dérive*) as opposed to “drive” and they “direct us toward the mythic point that has been articulated in terms of the object relation (Lacan, 1997, p. 90).”¹⁰ Drives, for Lacan, do not seek an object directly. The aim of a drive is to “drift” in such a way as to seek a condition of repetitive, circular movement around its object. But how does one get from the object to *das Ding*? Lacan, using the analogy of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, provides the following enigmatic response: In effect, the rabbit to be conjured from the hat is to be already found in the instinct. The rabbit is not a new object; it is a change of object in itself. If the drive allows the change of object, it is because it is already marked by the articulation of the signifier.... The properly metonymic relation between one signifier and another that we call desire is not a new object, or a previous object, but the change of object in itself (Lacan, 1997, p. 293).

What Lacan seems to be saying here – and it is hardly coincidental that he is using the language of a magician – is that there exists the ability to access the real via the symbolic order through a process that, while rooted in the symbolic order, can somehow, at the same time, pass through the symbolic order. As one commentator has described it: The real ... exceeds the symbolic ..., but the latter provides the only access to the former. Thus, access to the real ... is only achieved through a form of symbolic sublimation that traces the excess within symbolization. There is no direct access to the real, only an oblique passage (Critchley, 1998, p. 77).

In order to understand how this “oblique passage” occurs, we must understand what Lacan means by “the line of sight that defines desire (Lacan, 1997, p. 247).” By paying attention to the rich splendor of the object’s appearance (*Erscheinung*), the object can then exhibit a trace of its character as a *thing*. This is because, for Lacan, the Thing “subsists” in the object: “the object is established in a certain relationship to the Thing and is intended to encircle and to render both present and absent (Lacan, 1997, p. 141).”

Lacan is saying here something that is very similar to Kant, namely, that the phenomenal, or symbolic, order is somehow determined through a *totality* of conditions that stand outside of that order, but to which the phenomenal/symbolic order stands in a necessary relationship – a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. This is why, for Lacan, it is the excessive “wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous ... character of [the object that] pointed to its thingness (Lacan, 1997, p. 114).”

This is also why Lacan is so interested in transgressive acts, like those depicted in *Antigone*, where one is able to pass through the symbolic order to a beyond that is *Ohne Begriff*: “This is the point where the false metaphors of being (*l’étant*) can be distinguished from the position of Being (*l’être*) itself, and we find its place articulated ... as a limit (Lacan, 1997, p. 248).” Here we live on the edge between form and formlessness because we are engaged in a process of tracing a chain of signifying relationships while, *à la* Wittgenstein, attempting to throw away the ladder after having climbed it. As one astute observer has characterized these attempts: “They bring us to the limit of the meaningless real [*réel*] (Van Haute, 1998, p. 105).”

The problem of interiority in Freud and Lacan is fundamentally linked to the problem of sublimation – raising the object to the dignity of *das Ding* – simply because *das Ding* exists as a possibility that remains exterior to the signifying chain. Without the presence of *das Ding*, the order of words and things collapses and we are left with what has come to be referred to as “the play of signifiers.”

However, Lacan's notion of *das Ding* is indeed problematic: "We are projected into something that is far beyond the domain of affectivity, something moving, obscure and without reference points.... (Lacan, 1997, p. 103)." *Das Ding* is present only in the form of an absence – a gravitational pull, or centripetal force, drawing upon the signifying chain. A recognition of Lacan's commitment to a necessary yet oblique connection between the symbolic order and the ineffable *das Ding* helps us to understand his provocative claim that "[the] zone Oedipus entered after having scratched out his eyes needs to be explored (Lacan, 1997, p. 309)." The pressing issue confronting neo-Lacanianism is the extent to which such blindness can lead to insight.

¹ See Lopez, 1996, p. 5: 'Once Freud realized, however, that the ego itself could become libidized, could become a sexually fantasized object, the opposition between a real, external, and libidinally invested object and the ego itself collapsed.'

² One aspect of the uniqueness of the *Project* was that it was abandoned by Freud—stashed in a drawer—and discovered inadvertently after his death.

³ Freud complete the sentence by adding: '[A]nd it is thus that in the interior of the system there arises the impulsion which sustains all psychical activity (Freud, 1895, p. 317).'

⁴ According to Freud, 'A *side-cathexis* thus acts as an *inhibition of the course of Q₁*. [I]t modifies the course of the current (Freud, 1895, p.323).'

⁵ See Freud, 1957, pp. 313-132: '[T]he barriers suddenly lifted, the veils dropped, and it was possible to see the details of neurosis all the way to the very conditioning of consciousness. Everything fell into place, the cogs meshed, the thing really seemed to be a *machine which in a moment would run of itself* (emphasis added).'

⁶ For example: 'ψ is not in a position, to begin with, to make this distinction [between an object as *real* vs. an imaginary idea] since it can only work on the basis of the sequence of analogous states between neurons (Freud, 1895, p. 325).'

⁷ The quote is as follows: "If we look at the unconscious ... reduced to its most fundamental and truest shape, we shall have to conclude no doubt that *psychical* reality is a particular form of existence not to be conflated with *material* reality." Although Freud had already made a distinction between "thought reality" and "external reality" in the second section of Part III of the *Project* (1895), this sentence was not added until 1909 – nine years after the first edition of the *Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1900.

⁸ See Van Haute, 1998, p. 108: 'For Freud, the Thing is thus the whole of the perceptual system, or memory traces, of the Other, which we cannot bring into connection with our own bodily experience....'

⁹ See Lacan, 1977, p. 154: 'We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier....'

¹⁰ My understanding of Lacan's concept of 'drives' has benefited from Evans, 1996, pp. 46-47.

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