

November Seminar 2020

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP

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The signifier, Desire, and Demand

Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious (XIII)

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Lacan outlines the session as an exploration of the distinction between demand and desire. He emphasizes that this dissection brings up the importance of *Spaltung* as the internal division within the subject. The split is more significant in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for the two concepts, desire and demand, may present a dilemma for the analysts to speculate them as 'frustration' and 'gratification.' The analyst chooses a midway so that the analysand experiences neither frustration nor gratification in his relationship with the analysand. Freud examined the ego-split or *Ichspaltung* in his clinical illustration in terms of fetishism and psychosis, wherein these psychopathological conditions, two simultaneous attitudes of acceptance and disavowal, coexist. Lacan redesigns this theoretical position. This *Ichspaltung* for Lacan refers here to the irreducible split within the ego caused by the unconscious. This split is not set in within fetishism and psychosis alone. *Ichspaltung* is the omnipotent undercurrent of the subject's constitution as the fundamental truth of human subjectivity. Simply put, the bar in Lacan's algebraic formula of the subject $\$$ symbolizes this essential *Ichspaltung*.

Recalling this point elsewhere in the seminar, Lacan underlines that a mask always shields desire as an underside of a symptom linked to something outside. Lacan reminds his audience of the case of Fräulein Elisabeth von R., whose psychosomatic manifestation—pain in the upper right thigh—was related to her father and her childhood friend's desire. R. is a Freudian case history of a Hungarian woman in his study of hysteria.

In effect, this pain comes up when the patient evokes the time she was entirely enslaved to her sick father's desire and demands, and when her attraction to her childhood friend's desire, which she reproaches herself for having taken into consideration, was at work in the margins. The pain in her thigh *is* the desire of her two brothers-in-law, one of whom, the spouse of her younger sister, represents the good masculine desire, and the other, the bad—the latter was considered, moreover, by all these women as quite a nasty man. (Lacan, 2017, 316)

The alteration (conversion) in a symptom shows itself in the somatic exhibition of desire so that the symptom is the front and desire is the back of this formation. As the analysis reveals, the practice of signification determines this secret of desire. However, this signification does not lend its ultimate meaning, for "it is possible that desire is a by-product, as it were by the act of

signification,” (Ibid). Lacan retracts his arguments to several essays by Otto Rank on perversion that shows itself as a symptom, not a clear manifestation of the unconscious desire. Rank concludes that *Verdrängung* or repression plays a decisive role in both perversion and symptom. In one of these essays, “Neurosis and Perversion,” the author presents a weird act by his patient after performing his victorious first sexual act. As the author states, overwhelmed by this experience, the patient “drop his pants, effectively, and displays himself on the embankment of the railway line, lit up by a train as it goes past. He thus happens to display himself to a whole crowd of people without running the slightest risk.” (Ibid). Rank interprets this act as the patient’s way of manifesting his neurosis. This act, by way of signification, directs the analysis to the core of the problem. That is an act that the patient performs to hide himself behind it, which is nothing but the phallus. The words of the patient for Lacan were enough to conclude that the experience was thoroughly satisfying, but the patient’s act reveals a desire beyond the sexual satisfaction of the experience in question. The thing that fills that beyond is what the subject has to desire. Lacan mentions this example as an illustration of signification that holds the key for interpreting the patient’s performance. In the meantime, it also shows a deep semblance of desire with the symptom. That is what happens in the hysteria that desire manifests itself behind the mask of a somatic sign.

Lacan offers another example from the cult of spirit possession among the Ethiopians of Gondar by the French surrealist ethnographer Michel Leiris. The ecstatic African cults seek exorcism and therapy by the re-enacting and mimetic exposition of the otherness (alterity). As such, the performer liberates himself from the power of the other by imitation. The imitation externalizes the power of spirit possession. Lacan explicates further that in these ceremonies called *wadāgā*, the performers imitate the pre-identified spirits. The spirit takes possession of the performers. During the ceremony, the performers mimic the outside spirit in order to train them and discipline them. This ritual creates an emotional state in the performers whereby they satisfy their demands.

As the above examples indicate, these rituals manifest the link of satisfaction with desire and the latter’s kinship with the pain. As Lacan puts it, “Ultimately, what desire borders on—not in its developed, masked forms, but in its pure and simple form—is the pain of existence.” (318)

As the above references indicate, the performers idealize and identify with an imagined Other (the spirit) Lacan relates to the dialectic of demand. The discourse of the demand is composed of the signifiers that arrive from the place of the Other. These signifiers of demand function as an indicator of the presence of the Other. This presence of the Other comes to dominate the satisfaction.

This is what makes it the case that, so fundamentally, in such an extended and constant manner, the human being engages as much in empty speech [in early Lacan, language has imaginary and symbolic dimensions. The empty speech demotes the imaginary and the full speech the symbolic one. In the empty speech, the ego engages with its counterpart, and the full speech has signification only] substantial satisfactions—or at least in an appreciable and quite measurable proportion in comparison with the latter. The fundamental characteristic of what I have just been discussing is about this. (319)

Lacan argues that some domesticated animals such as minks engage in some empty speech. When in captivity, minks need to be talked to by the furriers to develop their pelts to better quality. In their natural state, minks do not get satisfaction unless the dealers coddle with them.

Lacan's next interrogation of the issue in question is a discussion of the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov's experiment and his neurophysiological discovery of the conditional reflex—the nervous system needs not learning for it has an in-built capacity to control human physiological and instinctual behaviour. It means that the nervous system directs the relation between an arbitrary stimulus and response-reflex, as Pavlov specifies in his famous experiment with dogs. For Palov, conditioned reflex leaves as part of auto neural reaction have no role for 'motive', 'intention', and 'will' in this process. Lacan interprets the electronic indicators such as bells and the reflex and the production of 'gastric juices' all as signifiers. These signifiers belong to the experimenter, who sees the signifying nature in the world, which explains the 'psychical progress.'

All the little electrical signals, the little buzzers and little bells which are drummed into the poor animals so as to make them secrete, on command, their various physiological productions, their gastric juices—they are all actually signifiers, really, and nothing but. They are the fabrication of experimenters for whom the world is very clearly constituted by a number of objective relations—a world an important part of which is formed by what one can rightly single out as properly signifying. In any case, the purpose of dreaming up and constructing all these things is to show the path of progressive substitution by which psychical progress can be conceived. (319)

Lacan argues that at the end of the Pavlovian experience, the animals could not learn any language, which happens in the human experience. The conditioned reflex in animals is different from that of humans, whereby the Other as the signifiers' locus plays a decisive role. Besides, Lacan goes on further that the discourse of the animal does not have a structural sequence. In humans, there is also a law by which the signifiers organize themselves. It is the Other that the discourse comes from in the human world. The dialectic of demand includes the subject and its relationship with the signifiers in the Other. Lacan suggests that "a signifier is essentially substitutive in nature concerning itself." (320). A signifier in the animal world is a substitute for its need, as conditioned reflex indicates. In humans, the signifier is always a substitute for itself. Concerning the subject and Other, the function of the signifier works according to the law of substitution. The subject presents himself in a world that structures itself with the position of the Other. The unsatisfied subject remains as a subject who complies with the demand of the Other. Demand is like *l'appel* or *cri* addressed to m(Other). The mother who satisfies the need of the infant signifies the love of m(Other). That is the love that is asked for in demand, like a natural and biological need. The symbolic signification of the demand suggests that demand for love dominates the demand for a biological need in the same demand. The portion of need is satisfiable, but the demand for love always remains an unsatisfiable leftover, constituted as the kernel of desire.

To further measure the gap or *Spaltung* between desire and demand, Lacan repeats his formulas of the previous sessions about desire, the ego, demand, the Other, the phallus, and signifier, and tries to redefine the signifier in simple terms. He does this by referencing the trace of the print of a naked single human footprint on the beach in chapter fourteen of *Robinson Crusoe*. Robinson is shocked by looking at the footprint, for it gives the evidence of another human being living on the island. Lacan sees this footprint as an evanescent trace. Lacan argues that when Robinson obliterates the footprint, the trace obtains the characteristics of a signifier. Robinson erases the footprint because the "trace is manifestly constituted as signified." (322). The signifier thus has a hollowness that ascertains the presence of something in the past like the footprint. That means that the signifier has the quality of scratching itself, especially its origin. That is the reason that a signifier is always barred. Lacan compares the signifier to the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*,

which means at once cancellation and rising to the higher level. The signifier shows only the place it once occupied in the system of the signs that arise from the Other's locus. So the signifier shows the place of something that is being desired *ad infinitum*. In Robinson Crusoe, the lack of desire constitutes the place where the footprint is erased.

Lacan exhorts us that the phallus is such a signifier that manifests desire in its naked form. That is why the phallus was treated as the privileged object of life and life-giving in Greek antiquity. Lacan even brings up a close etymological affinity between the phallus and 'pulsion', or drive. In the meantime, a human subject does not possess it, and it exists as an absence. The phallus had reserved a symbolic place in ancient culture as 'the mystery of antiquity.' But still, it is also a mark of castration.

In every ancient cult, as one gets closer to the cult, that is to say, to the signifying manifestation of the fertile power of the Great Goddess, the Syrian goddess, everything that has a reference to the phallus is the object of amputation, marks of castration or prohibition that are increasingly accentuated. Specifically, the eunuch character of the priest of the Great Goddess is attested in texts of all kinds. (327)

The phallus has such a veiled place in the field of signifiers that accession to it is barred. The phallus is the mark of castration in the Other and the sign of the Other's desire. In the Oedipus complex, the father's arrival functions as a replacement for this deprivation with the mother. The subject also finds its place as the desired object of the Other's desire with the phallus associated with a bar. Concerning a woman subject, the phallus functions as what is desired. In this context, a woman always finds its place as the phallus as it is a mark of desire. A desire to have a child remains in a female subject as a fetishized object. When a female subject offers herself as the object of desire, it identifies with the veiled phallus. That position turns her being "as subject as the desired phallus, the signifier of the Other's desire.

This being locates her beyond what one may call feminine masquerade, since everything that she displays of her femininity is ultimately linked to this profound identification with the phallic signifier, which is the most linked with femininity." (329)

Throughout *The Seminar V*, Lacan recounts his crucial statement that the phallus has a central role to play in desire, whether it reveals itself openly or disguised. The phallus is at once the imaginary signifier and of the signified of the mother's desire, "the phallus is the signifier of the signifier Desire-of-the-Mother." (Chiesa, 2007, 90). That implies that the phallus functions as a substitute for both the Name-of-the-Father signifier and the imaginary signified of the Desire-of-the-Mother.

The fact that the phallus partakes of both the signified and the signifier can rightly be grasped only if one realizes that, despite being strictly related to each other, the Name-of-the-Father and the phallus are *not* the same things. The former is understood by Lacan in Seminar V as the 'signifier of signifier.'" (91-92)

Joël Dor, in *The Clinical Lacan*, argues that the phallus has a regulating role in the relation of desire in the subject-mother-father triangle. The child primarily identifies with the object of the mother's desire. The father's intrusion in this mother-child tie mediates the economy of this coextensive structure of desire in the symbolic register. The phallic functions regulate the Oedipus complex as Lacan emphasizes in *The Seminar V*. The drama of the phallic function "has four protagonists: the mother, the father, the child and the phallus. The last term is the central element around which gravitate the desires of the other three." (Dor, 1999, 22). The phallus

adjusts the desires of the child concerning his mother and father. Without its presence, the child cannot regulate his desire with the other.

As this reference point, then, the phallus is simultaneously the element that is inscribed outside the series of desires since it is in relation to the phallus that a series of desires can be constituted, and also the element that governs the possibility of such a series, since in its absence desire cannot get free of its initial mooring. (Ibid)

In the end, Lacan returns to the phallic function and its implication for the gender divide. The phallic function implicates a woman as the object of desire, her being as a desired phallus. This desired phallus also functions as the signifier of the Other's desire. The repression *Verdrängt* of the phallus stands for as a fundamental feminine masquerade. In the meantime, as a result of foreclosure, *Verwerfung*, her status as the object of the Other's desire, would make her reject the way she appears as a woman. Lacan further explicates that a feminine "satisfaction goes via a substitutive path, whereas her desire manifests itself on a plane where it can only end in a profound *Verwerfung*, a profound estrangement of her being in relation to how she feels she is obliged to appear." (329)

Concerning the phallic function, Lacan allows the difference of gender not in favour of masculinity either. The situation is even more 'comical' for a man. The phallus that he has traumatizes him due to its lack of the phallus in his mother. Lacan seems to ally himself with psychoanalyst Keren Horney, who traces the feminine castration to their primitive masculinity. For Lacan, both genders find themselves equally in a similar quandary. In the end, the virility stays with a man due to the traditional and historical masculine discourse. Seeking his satisfaction with a woman, a man is also on the lookout for the phallus in his desire. As analytical practice shows, this sought-after phallus escapes the grasp. The phallus within femininity seems to be inside, whereas the phallus stays outside of a male subject. For Lacan, that answers the question of "centrifugal tendencies in a monogamous relationship," (330). Lacan concludes that in a love relationship, there is only an elusive game of give-and-take. A man does not have the phallus he pretends to possess. Nor a woman can be it.

What is at issue for a man, following the very definition of love, 'to give what one does not have', is to give what he does not have, the phallus, to a being who is not it. (Ibid)

In sum, Lacan began the session by drawing a line between desire and demand concerning the subject. The split between demand and desire is an inevitable outcome of the subject's inherent self-alienation represented in Lacan algebra as the barred subject $\$$. The demand always leaves a surplus after its satisfaction, and that surplus or leftover is the demand for love embedded in the subject's needs. That imperishable surplus functions as the kernel of desire in a metonymic structure. Still, each satisfaction of demand temporarily sidelines desire. Hence the split between demand and desire introduces the subject into the world of signifiers. Desire hides behind a mask like a symptom. Hysteria is a good case in point, where the patient's desire shows itself by somatic symptoms like Freudian hysterical case history indicated. By re-examining Pavlov's experiment on dogs, Lacan concludes that humans learn the signifiers and their place in the Other, unlike animals. That is why human action produces a signification whereas in the animal world, only biological responses function as signifiers with no signification. Lacan claims that the signifier is always with a hollowness where it places the desiring subject in the human world. Lacan defines the phallus as a signifier that hides in the chain of signifiers but plays the facilitator's role in the signification in language. Above all, the critical thing to note is that the phallus does not place a man or a woman in a privileged position so far as their desire is

concerned. The man who claims its possession does not have it, and the woman who considers herself as a phallus for a masculine desire cannot be it.

Notes:

Chies, Lorenzo, (2007), *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, The Massachusetts Institute Press (ITP), Massachusetts.

Dor, Joël, (1999), *The Clinical Lacan*, ed. Feher Gurewich in collaboration with Susan Fairfield, Other Press, New York.

Lacan, Jacques, (2017), *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious*, tr. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity Press, Cambridge.