Origins and Ends of the Mind:
Philosophical Essays on Psychoanalysis

Edited by
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Leuven University Press
Love as Ontology: Psychoanalysis against Philosophy

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'We are of the opinion, then, that language has carried out an entirely justifiable piece of unification in creating the word ‘love’ with its numerous uses, and that we cannot do better than take it as the basis of our scientific discussions and expositions as well. By coming to this decision, psycho-analysis has let loose a storm of indignation, as though it had been guilty of an act of outrageous innovation. Yet it has done nothing original in taking love in this ‘wider’ sense. In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love, the ‘Eros’ of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis.’

(Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego)

‘Love, unlike pain, is put to the test’

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, Zettel, Remark 504)

‘Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings’

(St. John of the Cross)

1. Preamble: The Indifference of Psychoanalysis to Ontology

Psychoanalysis has, from its origins, remained indifferent to or suspicious towards ontology. More precisely, the practice of psychoanalysis has not necessitated that clinical psychoanalysts intervene directly in ontological questioning, whether implicitly or explicitly. Even in the most volatile moments of its struggles to sustain itself as a singular practice, psychoanalysis has remained relatively unmoved in the face of the counter-claims, concepts and criticisms coming from philosophy — and, a fortiori, from philosophical ontologies. Indeed, the reverse seems to have been the case: it is philosophers who have had to respond, with some urgency, to the challenges offered by psychoanalysis. However different they may be, both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger showed themselves irritated and occasionally uncomprehending in the face of psychoanalytic claims, particularly around those inquiries into problems of language, the subject and ethics, which impinged upon philosophy’s traditional domains.

This irritation, notably, tended to take the form of imputations of an ontology. As Jacques Bouveresse comments, ‘What Wittgenstein refuses to acknowledge in psychoanalysis, as in set theory, is nothing less than its ontology’ (Bouveresse 1995: xvii). And if Heidegger could denominate the regime of modern science as that of ‘enframing,’ it is not entirely clear that — even if one accepts his account — psychoanalysis can be adequately encompassed by this delimitation (Heidegger 1977). This situation is all the more fraught given that Wittgenstein and Heidegger...
were themselves attempting to find an exit from classical ontologies. One can suspect a kind of kettle-logic at work: psychoanalysis isn’t philosophy, so we don’t need to touch it; psychoanalysis is only philosophy, and so succumbs to our critique of philosophy; psychoanalysis pretends to philosophy, and so we must punish it. In a word, the relationship between psychoanalysis and philosophy, such that it is, has been asymmetrical: psychoanalysis generates propositions that integrally affect philosophy; philosophy does not generate propositions that integrally affect psychoanalysis.

This has not, of course, been the case for scientific critiques. Precisely because, from Freud himself to the present, every great psychoanalytic orientation has insisted on some kind of essential relationship to science, psychoanalysis is constantly interrupted by a negative judgement: not scientific! This judgement can inspire both new exits and entrances: psychoanalysis has recourse to animal ethology, attachment theory and neuroscience, on the one hand, linguistics, literature, and other cultural resources, on the other. In this context, the results are anything but clear. As many “scientific” psychological treatments still considered viable today were developed by those who had trained as psychoanalysts (John Bowlby, for example, or Aaron Beck), the scientific status of psychoanalysis remains a topic of intense dispute, continuing in contemporary debates around neuro-psychoanalysis. As a general rule, psychoanalysis is supposed to stand or fall as a clinical discipline on the validity of its scientific methodology. If psychoanalysis is not a science, then it can be consigned to the hell of pre- or extra-scientific practices, like alchemy, shamanism or hermeneutics. And if it is not a science, then none of its claims can have any scientific value, not even as a goad, guide or inspiration for scientific work. Because psychoanalysis has clearly something to do with science, it must continue to engage with the ongoing discoveries emanating from various fields of science, from biology to physics. But because it is not clearly a science, its place cannot simply be fixed by such an identification. When psychoanalysis tries to become a ‘real’ science, it has always given way on its central hypotheses; when it resorts to more humanistic methods, it has dissolved into just another form of hermeneutics. If this state of affairs continues to prove problematic for psychoanalysis, it remains even more a problem for philosophy in its attempted critiques of psychoanalysis. This can lead to hilarious polemics. As David Corfield notes of the dispute between Karl Popper and Adolf Grünbaum, ‘Each accused the other’s principles of being so weak that they allowed even psychoanalysis to be called a science, when their own of course did not’ (Corfield 2002: 190). Moreover, such approaches tend

1 See also the other articles in the collection Lacan and Science (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2002). As J.-C. Milner acerbically remarks of Popper’s dismissal of Marx and Freud, ‘According to his own declarations, Popper constructed his falsificationist epistemology to the sole end of establishing a demarcation between science and political discourse — in the occasion, Marxism, put at the service of a world-view ... One will note that Popper aligns Freudian psychoanalysis with politicised Marxism. Pure and simple prejudice: it is, on the contrary, completely obvious that Freud is an illustration of falsificationist epistemology. See, among other examples, the introduction of a beyond of the pleasure principle on the basis of falsifying experience: the Fort-Da’ (Milner 1983: 92-93, n. 3). The dispute, evidently, continues….
to treat philosophy as auxiliary to the sciences, reduced to pointing out science’s contradictions and errors, delineating its limits, and justifying its epistemological priority over other disciplines. Perhaps the minimal form of scientific injunction that should be put to psychoanalysis is the following: ensure that the methodologies of psychoanalysis are not incompatible with the methodologies of contemporaneous science. This situation does not at all prevent us from asking questions as to the ontology of psychoanalysis, but it does introduce a necessary complication: one cannot plausibly explore the ontology of psychoanalysis without taking into account the fraught relation of psychoanalysis to science.

Strangely enough, I want to claim — following the recent indications of philosophers as different as Alain Badiou and Jonathan Lear — that it is the problem of love in psychoanalysis that enables a suturing (albeit paradoxical) of these disjunctions.2 Why? Because, finally, we can never forget that psychoanalysis is a clinical treatment. This treatment, this therapy, is above all a praxis. Psychoanalysis is not just a theory or a hermeneutic, it is not just an account of human desires and drives, nor a management program for sexual or traumatic disorders, but a work of love. Within psychoanalysis itself, love has been primarily understood under the heading of ‘transference,’ thereby simultaneously implicating the clinical and the conceptual, the ongoing practice of a treatment and the metapsychological theorisation of psychic events. What further complicates this picture is that psychoanalysis — in contradistinction to common doxa — comes not to praise, but to bury love. I will argue that this erotic interment procedure provides psychoanalysis with its peculiar ontology. In other words, and despite its rejection of ontology, there comes a time when psychoanalysis cannot help but touch on ontological questions.3

Let us first turn to Freud and then to Lacan to verify this in detail.

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2 See, for example, Badiou 2000 and Lear 1990.
2. From the symptom to the transference

Freud was always suspicious of the accusation that psychoanalysis had drawn substantially from philosophy. This position did not simply derive from ignorance or hostility; on the contrary, it was precisely Freud’s restrained enthusiasm for philosophy that fuelled his suspicions. Early on, Freud had been a disciple of Franz Brentano (with whom he later broke), and had once intended to enrol in a double doctorate in zoology and philosophy (Zaretsky 2004: 26-7). His early adherence to the Brücke-Helmholtz doctrine of science — which held that only physical and chemical forces were operative within an organism — itself clearly entails a kind of (unsophisticated) ontology. And Freud alludes to philosophical ontologies throughout his work, for example in a famous passage from Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), in which he admits, apropos of his new dualism of the life and death instincts, of Eros and Thanatos: ‘We have unwittingly steered our course into the harbour of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.’ But such references smack more of erudite politesse than genuine influence. Even at the moment of Freud’s most counter-intuitive explorations of the consequences of his self-confessedly speculative drive hypothesis, with its overtones of the pre-Socratic Empedocles, he never entirely abandons his dream that psychological functions might eventually be given a biochemical foundation.

In other words, to the extent that Freud expresses any concern for ontology at all, it’s tangential, opportunistic or diffident. Ontology is what philosophers do or discuss; it’s not centrally a psychoanalytic concern. However — and this needs to be underlined — to the extent that psychoanalysis is part of the modern scientific dispensation, it must have some empirical basis. What, in Freud’s opinion, differentiates science from other disciplines is its empiricism, its resolute and ascetic commitment to the reality principle. For Freud, then, psychoanalysis doesn’t need an ontology of its own; it can remain happily parasitic on that of contemporary science (or the sciences). It is possible that Freud remains too happily naïve, even pre-Kantian, in his understanding of the empirical nature of science.

Yet, the problem of what counts as empirical evidence for psychoanalysis cannot be so easily avoided. As aforementioned, psychoanalysis has always experienced difficulties making itself stick as a science. Freud himself often fixed on an analogy with astronomy as an observational science. As he writes in his New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (1933), a work throughout which the relation to science insists as a problem: ‘Only quite a short while ago the medical faculty in an American University refused to allow psycho-analysis the status of a science, on the ground that it did not admit of any experimental proof. They might have raised the same objection to astronomy; indeed, experimentation with the heavenly bodies is particularly difficult. There one has to fall back on observation’ (SE 22: 22).

This, however, then begs the question: what, exactly, does psychoanalysis
observe? If the obvious answer is ‘the unconscious,’ this can’t quite be the case. The unconscious is by definition unobservable in any direct fashion. If one wanted to pursue Freud’s astronomical reference, one would have to say that the unconscious is not a stellar body like the sun or planets, but something like a black hole, discernible only through the otherwise inexplicable anomalies it introduces into the movements of other, perceivable bodies. So if the unconscious itself remains unobservable (if not ‘untestable’) by standard psychological means, there is one observable phenomenon that psychoanalysis takes as its own: transference-love.

The peculiar nature of the transference emerges right at the beginning of psychoanalysis. At the conclusion of Breuer and Freud’s *Studies in Hysteria* (1893-5), Freud, in the course of a discussion of the way in which patients treat their physician, notes that ‘[t]ransference on to the physician takes place through a *false connection*’ (SE 3: 302). Not only is such a connection false, patently false, but the patient — who in some way knows very well how artificial, how fictional, this connection is — finds herself ‘deceived afresh every time this is repeated’ (SE 3: 303). Such self-deception has very real effects: Breuer seems to have found himself in hot water in regards to at least one of his patients, Anna O. (real name: Bertha Pappenheim). And Anna O. is the person who famously denominated the unorthodox treatment she helped to invent, ‘the talking cure.’

It’s worth pausing a moment given the subsequent popularity of this characterisation in psychoanalytic history. Why the talking cure? Who is talking? To whom is such talk addressed? What is the significance of talk? The answers psychoanalysis gives to these questions require it to depart from all previous accounts of language-use, not to mention biological explanation. The talk is addressed to shadowy figures who, though failing to exist, nonetheless organise the subject’s entire relationship to reality. Who talks? Something completely other than the person apparently talking. Why these words? Because there is something rotten in the state of the mind which inexorably distorts the utterance, binding it to odd physical symptoms with no discernible physiological basis. Anna O. also spoke of her treatment as ‘chimney-sweeping’: words can function as a chimney-brush, although the soot shifted ultimately turns out to be made of dirty lost words as well.

What are the ontological consequences of such a phenomenon? That the traces of a past that has no existence but in residues of unconscious infantile decisions continue to shape the physics of the present in ways that do not have any relationship with empirical, social or biological actualities. Into the bargain, the entire comportment of subjects towards their reality is bound up with something they cannot know, but whose effects they evince as ciphers. The transference is not just evidence of the return of these fictions in reality, but itself emblematic of the work of these fictions: the disorder of subjects is the symptom of a disorder of love.

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4 See M. Borch-Jacobsen’s very detailed and damning account of this case in *Remembering Anna O. A Century of Mystification* (Borch-Jacobsen 1996).
This love has no respect for empirical realities or specific differences.

The effects of the transference are such that, by the time of the notorious case-study of Dora, Freud is forced (as Lacan notes in a context to which we will return) to reconsider the transference not merely as a local or sporadic phenomenon, but as an obstacle of global import for psychoanalysis. In his postscript to this case-study, Freud has recourse to a metaphor to illuminate the ruses of the transference:

What are transferences? They are *new editions or facsimiles* of the tendencies and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for their species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician. To put it another way: *a whole series of psychological experiences are revived,* not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician in the present moment. Some of these transferences have a content which differs from their model in no respect except for the substitution. These, then — to keep to the same metaphor — are merely *new impressions or reprints.* Others are more ingeniously constructed: their content has been subjected to a moderating influence — to *sublimation,* as I call it — and they may even become conscious, by cleverly taking advantage of some real peculiarity in the physician’s person or circumstances and attaching themselves to that. These then will no longer be a new impression, but *revised editions* (SE 7: 116).

From this time on, the difficulties of the transference will move to the very centre of psychoanalytic treatment, having serious consequences for the theory itself.\(^5\) The transference is found to have a number of disturbing features, to the extent that Freud will suggest the only really serious difficulties of psychoanalytic treatment ‘lie in the management of the transference.’ First, transference is automatic in the analytic situation. Second, it functions there as a resistance to cure, whereas, outside such a situation (in the ‘real world’) it would be a therapeutic force. Third, there is no essential difference between transference and other kinds of love.\(^6\) As such, transference is to be understood as an automatic fictional reprint that works to sustain repression through self-deception; as it does so, it produces the singular

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\(^1\) See the articles on technique as well as other pieces, especially ‘The Dynamics of Transference’ (1912) and ‘Observations on Transference-Love’ (1914) in SE 12.

\(^6\) ‘It is true that love consists of new editions of old traits and that it repeats infantile reactions. But this is the essential character of every state of being in love. There is no such state which does not reproduce infantile prototypes. It is precisely from this infantile determination that it receives its compulsive character, verging as it does on the pathological. Transference-love has perhaps a degree less of freedom than the love which appears in ordinary life and is called normal; it displays its dependence on the infantile patterns more clearly, and is less adaptable and capable of modification; but that is all, and not what is essential’ (SE 12: 168).
world of the subject as something in which that subject is out of joint. But, by the same token, it is also a medium of world transformation, the very medium within which psychoanalysis works and flourishes.\(^7\)

This brings us to a fourth point: the analyst is irremediably implicated in the situation in which he is intervening. Hence the problem of ‘observing observations — of second-order phenomena — is injected directly at the heart of the analytic experience. It is no longer enough for the analyst to rely on the classical ‘formations of the unconscious’ (dreams, slips, symptoms, jokes); rather, we have (apologies for the shop-worn metaphor) something analogous to the paradoxes of particle physics, Freud’s transference as Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. The observer transforms the situation simply through observing; such observing, in principle, precludes total knowledge of that situation; such an epistemological gap gives onto an ontological abyss. (One hardly needs to add that this aspect of the transference continues to horrify every critic of psychoanalysis, from Grünbaum to the adherents of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. By the same token, it continues to horrify every adherent of psychoanalysis, too.)

This theory of love finds itself further ramped up in Freud’s confrontation with the death drive. As Jonathan Lear remarks, ‘In 1920 Freud fundamentally changed his theory of the drives. In particular, he substituted love for sexuality. To this day it remains unclear what this change means’ (Lear 2003: 157). Then Lear continues, ‘The overwhelming consensus is that the change means very little.’ Perhaps Lear is right about such a consensus. If so, it can be read as the index of a resistance of psychoanalysis to itself. I will return to this below. But Lear also makes the point that the transference must be understood for Freud as a world-making operation, of worlding or worldliness. Thus: ‘Phenomena show up in the world, the world itself is not another phenomenon. Nor is worldliness. So if transference is worldliness itself, then ‘it’ is not a phenomenon in the world. Rather, it is more like the structuring condition in which phenomena show up for us’ (Lear 2003: 196).\(^8\)

If the transference, then, is something that one ‘works through’ in the analytic situation, the problem is that one can never overcome transferential relations altogether.\(^9\) To live is to transfer; to transfer is to implicate residues of prior

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\(^7\) If sublimation is here distinguished from the transference by Freud this is not really a difference in kind: sublimation’s role being limited to that of an editor, in its additions to, subtractions from, and retractions of a fundamental text. As Ann Carson notes, ‘Transference arises in almost every psychoanalytic relationship when the patient insists on falling in love with the doctor, despite the latter’s determined aloofness, warnings and discouragement. An important lesson in erotic mistrust is available to the analysand who observes himself concocting in this way a love object out of thin air’ (Carson 1998: 64).

\(^8\) As Lear elsewhere notes, ‘There is no content to the idea of a world that is not a possible world for us. And a world that is not lovable (by beings like us) is not a possible world’ (Lear 1990: 142).

\(^9\) See Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’ (SE 12: 155). As is often noted, ‘working through’ remains one of the most obscure and under-developed concepts of psychoanalysis. For an interesting recent take on the subject, see Hoens and Pluth 2004. My own opinion is the opposite of this: the reason that the concept of ‘working through’ seems undeveloped is only because psychoanalysis itself is nothing but this working-through....
transferences. No world is total, but is composed of the residues of other worlds — without those worlds ever being able to be absolutely destroyed or normed according to any “objective” criteria (even the criteria of the hard sciences). Lear will even identify “three distinct species of transference”:

(a) transference of meaning from a significant figure in the analysand’s world onto the analyst.
(b) transference as an idiosyncratic world coming into view.
(c) transference as the active disruption of the capacity to carry out transference in either of the first two senses.

What Lear finds here is a war at the heart of love. Meaning for a subject derives from its indifference to particularity, from the fact that the subject is a repetition machine for whom deranging affects emerge in its trafficking of unconscious investments. In the illegal displacement that is transference, an entirely singular subjective world becomes discernible, only to break down again under the conditions of analysis. ‘Being’ arises as the consequence of an operation of sense, but founders as it does so, undermined by its own operations. Yet there is no absolute way out of these operations: the transference implicates the analyst as much as the analysand.

One can also see in this tripartite division all the difficulties commentators have experienced in identifying Freud’s ontology. Is Freud a monist or a dualist? After all, on close scrutiny, Freud’s apparent oppositions of ‘pleasure’ and ‘reality’ principles, or of ‘life’ and ‘death’ drives, turn out not to be simply opposed, but interruptive modifications of each other (e.g., ‘reality’ as a *deferral* or *calculating emissary* of ‘pleasure’). Moreover, these principles/drives proceed at a diagonal to the ways in which philosophers have traditionally considered ontology. Pushing it a little, one might even detect a pastiche of the Hegelian “science of logic” at work here: the operation of meaning-making posits being, only to find both meaning and being are undone in and by that very positing…. This paradoxical situation renders the problem of psychoanalytic cure very fraught. What, exactly, could a cure be under the conditions of the transference? As we know, Freud himself ended his working life — or rather failed to end — by canvassing the possibility that an analysis might be ‘interminable’.

So the transference introduces a genuinely irreducible division into the field of psychoanalysis. If psychoanalysis is to be a materialism, on what material does psychoanalysis operate? Is it a materialism of the organism or a materialism of discourse? This can be put as a question: is language a technology? The transference is precisely something which gives a negative answer to this question, and, in doing

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10 As Lear adds, ‘This is an aspect of transference that is often overlooked: the figures are not only coming from the past, they are coming from an earlier type of world-formation’ (Lear 2003: 206).
11 See Freud’s superb deconstruction of the aporias of love, at the centre of *Civilization and its Discontents* (SE 21).
12 Lear 2005: 129. The entire chapter is highly relevant in this context.
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so, unleashes psychoanalysis from classical science and from philosophy. As we have seen, however, problems remain with Freud’s conception of the transference. It is part of Lacan’s originality to have returned to this conception, in order to clarify and further extend its field of operations. In this clarification, the role of psychoanalysis as a little apocalyptic praxis moves to the fore.

3. ‘What is your ontology?’

Where Freud was often diffident about ontology, Lacan came to be virulent. A committed ‘antiphilosopher,’ he consistently insisted on the ruptures from philosophical ontologies that psychoanalysis had effected. Yet Lacan was also far more clearly, directly and intensely interested in philosophy than Freud himself; indeed, there is no other psychoanalytic text so imblicated with philosophical motifs, or with the key philosophical debates of its time. Even a cursory glance at Lacan’s *Seminars* or *Ecrits* will reveal his deeply antagonistic commitment to philosophy. In these pages, we find an extraordinary attention to the pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Cynics, the Stoics, the Sceptics, the Epicureans, the Scholastics, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Bentham, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Russell — that is, the entire Western tradition — as well as traces of his own highly ambivalent exchanges over more than thirty years with such diverse contemporaries as Alexandre Kojève, Alexandre Koyré, Jean Hyppolite, Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Derrida, among others. Yet this confrontation with philosophy often only leads to the conclusion that it, coming before or misunderstanding the epoch of modern science, remains absolutely inadequate to the true nature of desire.

Perhaps Lacan’s most celebrated declaration in this context arises in response to the young Jacques-Alain Miller in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan replies to Miller’s flat demand ‘what is your ontology?’ with a slippery double statement. On the one hand, the unconscious does serve ‘an ontological function’; on the other, ‘[t]he gap of the unconscious may be said to be pre-ontological.’ (Lacan 1964: 29). From this Lacanian perspective, the entire realm of ontology is the tributary of a poorly-posed question, itself dependent on

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15 Lacan continues: ‘what truly belongs to the order of the unconscious, is that it is neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealised’ (30).
an incompetent comprehension of language. The unconscious inspires an ethics, not an ontology; indeed, the very ex-sistence of the unconscious acts as a universal caustic, corroding all traditional ontologies. Rather than an ontology, then, Lacan proposes an ‘hontology,’ that is, of the shame-being of the subject (Lacan 1969-70: 209). In the light of this hostility, one might still attempt — as has been done — to throw the dispute onto another level in order to render such concepts as ‘the Real’ or ‘jouissance’ stand in as a kind of de facto if disavowed ontology. In my opinion, such attempts fail for at least two reasons: first, because to speak like this is to succumb to the ‘jouissance of the idiot,’ insisting on recuperating what is in question; second, because the jouissance of the idiot fails the challenges of science.

Because this is precisely where the problem of science in Lacan arises: not only the science of linguistics as he adapts it from Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but the sciences of animal ethology, cybernetics and genetics. Commentators sometimes fail to note how often references to Pavlov, to Norbert Wiener, John von Neumann and Gregory Bateson appear in Lacan’s work, showing him to be au fait with contemporaneous developments. Jean-Claude Milner has, moreover, suggested that Lacan affirms the following propositions: ‘1) that psychoanalysis operates on a subject (and not for example on an ego); 2) that there is a subject of science; 3) that these two subjects are one and the same.’ Psychoanalysis and modern science share a subject — which does not mean that psychoanalysis is simply one science among others for Lacan. But psychoanalysis, at least, takes that subject as its subject.

16 Judith Butler has offered a succinct summation of this general tendency in Lacan: ‘Lacan disputes the primacy given to ontology within the terms of Western metaphysics and insists upon the subordination of the question “What is/has being?” to the prior question “How is ‘being’ instituted and allocated through the signifying practices of the paternal economy?”’ (Butler 1989: 43).

17 Like Freud, Lacan was highly attuned to the problem of the formalisation of psychoanalytic results; unlike Freud, he turned to contemporary developments in mathematical formalisation (notably Bourbaki and topology) as a guide. Among the central results of this interest were the mathemes, fragments of specifically psychoanalytic knowledge. Given the (often ludicrous) controversies that surround these little letters, it is worth reiterating that they were considered fragments of inductive analytic results and to be deployed as pedagogical devices. For example, ‘Mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal. Why? Because it alone is matheme, in other words, it alone is capable of being integrally transmitted,’ (Lacan 1972-73: 119). See also B. Burgoyne, ‘From the letter to the matheme: Lacan’s scientific methods,’ in Rabaté 2003: 69-85; A. Cutofello, ‘The Ontological Status of Lacan’s Mathematical Paradigms,’ in S. Barnard and B. Fink (eds.), Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality (Albany: SUNY, 2002), pp. 141-170; and J. Clemens, ‘Letters as the Condition of Conditions for Alain Badiou,’ Communication & Cognition, Vol. 36, Nos. 1-2 (2003), pp. 73-102.

Descartes proves the touchstone. For Lacan, the Cartesian approach:

is directed essentially not towards science, but towards its own certainty. It is at the heart of something that is not science in the sense in which, since Plato and before him, it has been the object of the meditation of philosophers, but Science itself [La science]. The science in which we are caught up, which forms the context of the action of all of us in the time in which we are living, and which the psycho-analyst himself cannot escape, because it forms part of his conditions too, is Science itself.

It is in this relation to this second science, Science itself, that we must situate psycho-analysis. We can do so only by articulating upon the phenomenon of the unconscious the revision that we have made of the foundation of the Cartesian subject (Lacan 1964: 231).19

This is where science and psychoanalysis are placed in a particular relation by Lacan: this relation is, as can immediately be seen, different to the relation of science and psychoanalysis maintained by Freud. What Lacan’s revision demands is that the subject be the pure support of the signifier (I will come back to this). This thumbnail sketch also suggests some of the difficulties in discussing Lacan’s take on ‘ontology.’ Not only is Lacan’s development complicated and overdetermined, but, as Gilbert Chaitin remarks, he sees the transference ‘as the source of a permanent crisis in psychoanalysis, and repeatedly terms it a paradox’ (Chaitin 1996: 151). It remains true, in other words, that for Lacan as for Freud, the paradox of love is central to whatever he offers for ontology.

In an early paper entitled ‘Intervention on the transference’ (1951), Lacan betrays his indebtedness to Kojève’s Hegel: ‘psychoanalysis is a dialectical experience, and this notion ought to prevail when one poses the question of the nature of the transference’ (Lacan 1966a: 216). Returning to the case of Dora, Lacan shows how a development of truth emerges in a series of dialectical reversals, inspired by the transference. First of all, Freud responds to Dora’s complaints by confronting her with her own complicity in the situation of which she complains. Second, the supposed object of Dora’s jealousy (her identification with her father) masks another interest. Third, Dora’s fascination with Mme K. is not due to the latter’s ineffable individuality (i.e., ‘the ravishing whiteness of her body’), but derives from the mystery for Dora of her own bodily femininity. Transference is thus, for Lacan, not only the motor of the emergence of truth in a situation through a sequence of reversals that involve the negation of the subject’s being, but implicates an asymmetrical double of the subject: the analyst who, to be an analyst at all, has already submitted him- or herself to precisely the same procedure and passed through to the other side. The analyst’s role is here that of ‘a positive non-acting,’

19 See also J.-A. Miller, ‘Elements of Epistemology’ in Glynos and Stavrakis, pp. 147-165.
the necessity to make interventions that are not those of an authority, exemplar, teacher, friend or guide (Lacan 1966a: 226).

This relation of the transference to ontology is clarified in Seminar I (1953-4), by way of a discussion of Freud’s case-study of the ‘Wolf Man.’ Discriminating the transference from resistance as he discriminates Verdrängung (‘repression’) from Verwerfung (‘foreclosure’), Lacan draws the conclusion that there is something beyond repression that, as its kernel, ‘is literally as if it did not exist.’ He continues: ‘this is the very essence of the Freudian discovery’ (Lacan 1953-54: 54). As we know, this non-existent kernel turns out to be nothing other than the Other itself, that which supports, in Lacan’s notorious formulation, the ‘unconscious structured like a language.’ So as this kernel of non-existence is unveiled at the heart of the subject by the transference, the transference is itself revealed to be the kernel of love. For if Eros in the later Freud is ‘the universal presence of a power of bonding between subjects,’ the transference is more specifically a ‘love-passion, such as is concretely lived by the subject as a sort of psychological catastrophe’ (ibid, 130). Lacan will even remark, in response to a comment by Jean Hyppolite, that ‘love is a form of suicide’ (ibid, 172). And if love certainly has its effects across all three of the Lacanian registers — the imaginary, symbolic and real — it seems to operate for Lacan primarily at the imaginary level. Narcissism and aggression are coeval and inseparable for Lacan, the self and its objects repeating indefinitely across a smeary hall of mirrors.

If there is no space here to examine even the major technical innovations of Lacan in adequate detail, I will again underline the crucial role that love plays as his premier nut-cracking tool: the paradoxes of transference-love are precisely what Lacan relies on to illuminate everything in psychoanalysis, from very specific clinical issues to large-scale structural concerns. If we run briefly through a few of the published Seminars, this becomes very clear. In Seminar III (1955-56) Lacan underlines that the transference is a resistance on the analyst’s part, and resorts to medieval Scholastic theory to illuminate the ‘question of the subject’s relation to

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20 As Lacan notes in this important presentation, it is under the rubric of the transference that Freud first recognises there may be obstacles to the success of psychoanalysis. But Lacan’s presentation here also depends on a doctrine of ‘intersubjectivity,’ a doctrine which soon gives way under the conceptual consequences of the transference.

21 Indeed, this is a point common to many if not most psychoanalytic orientations; e.g., ‘my patient is a narcissist, like any other person grandiosely surmounting all others by falling in love;’ E. Young-Bruehl, Where do we fall when we fall in love? (New York: Other Press, 2003), p. 16.

22 However — and this is a crucial point — Lacan also always considers love in excess of a pure narcissistic demand. That is, transference ≠ suggestion, although the line between them is irredducibly ambiguous. See, for example, Lacan 1957-58: 429. Bound up with this distinction is Lacan’s consistent refusal of another distinction, i.e., his critique of the very concept of ‘counter-transference.’ Transference is ‘an open field’ (my emphasis), and not a simple projection of one subject onto another; it exceeds, in other words, any problematic of ‘intersubjectivity.’
the absolute Other’ (Lacan 1955-56: 253).\footnote{As Lacan says, ‘It may seem to you that it’s a curious and unusual detour to resort to a medieval theory of love in order to introduce the question of psychosis. It is, however, impossible to conceive the nature of madness otherwise’ (Lacan 1955-56: 253).} In Seminar IV (1956-57), returning to the ruses of courtly love (as he will throughout his career), Lacan shows how love separates humans from their biological needs, introducing a permanent dimension of desiring non-satisfaction into life. Love and the gift of love aim at something radically Other than the needs of the organism, that is, at the lack at the heart of Being. With love — here’s another famous Lacanian slogan — we find ‘there is no greater gift possible, no greater sign of love, than the gift of what one doesn’t have’ (Lacan 1956-57: 140). Yet love, being imaginary, must find its point of support in an object; as it does so, love separates itself from desire, insofar as desire is directly attached to the lack, the nothing beyond being…. This is where the transference is so crucial, and where Lacan will link these ontological concerns back to clinical experience and practice: ‘For if love is giving what one does not have, it is certainly true that the subject can wait to be given it, since the psychoanalyst has nothing else to give him. But he does not even give him this nothing, and it is just as well: and that is why he is paid for this nothing, preferably well paid, in order to show that it would not otherwise be worth much’ (Lacan 1966b: 255).\footnote{As Lacan also says in this key essay, ‘the transference becomes the analyst’s security, and the relation to the real the terrain on which the combat is decided’ (235).}

Love is at once tied firmly to the void of the signifier at the very moment that it betrays this void with the glitter of a lost object. By Seminar VII (1959-60), love functions as a retreat from the enjoyment of the other and, as sublimation, works as a kind of barrier against the intolerable emptiness of the Thing, now located beyond the signifier (Lacan 1959-60). Seminar VIII (1960-1), entitled, precisely, ‘The Transference,’ is dedicated to a reading of Plato’s Symposium, in which the role of the agalma in love is unveiled. This agalma, which Alcibiades discerns in Socrates, is ‘the good object that Socrates has in his belly,’ of which Socrates himself is no more than the envelope (Lacan 1960-61: 213).

So if Lacan clearly retains from Freud the automatic, fictional, lawless, passionate, narcissistic, revelatory qualities of the transference (it is a world-making illness that can be leveraged through psychoanalytic treatment into a world-unmaking act), he exacerbates its link to an original double, the two of an encounter.\footnote{In Seminar VIII, Lacan gives, unusually for him, a pretty little ‘myth’ of love which foregrounds the uncanniness of such an encounter: ‘This hand which reaches for the fruit, the rose, the bush that suddenly burns, its gesture of reaching, attracting, stirring up, is closely attached to the maturation of the fruit, the beauty of the flower and the blazing of the bush. But, when in this movement of reaching, attracting, stirring up, when the hand has gone far enough towards the object, when from the fruit, the flower, the bush, a hand stretches itself to meet yours, and when at that moment it is your hand that congeals in the closed plenitude of the fruit, the open plenitude of the flower, in the explosion of a hand that burns — well, what happens there is love’ (Lacan 1960-61: 69).} For a long time, and despite Lacan’s constant theoretical revisions, this encounter is conceived as a metaphor, that is, as a symptom which at once interrupts and veils the unconscious of which it is precisely the evidence. Hence, in Seminar...
XI (1964), we find that the ‘transference is the enactment of the reality of the unconscious’ and ‘the means by which the communication of the unconscious is interrupted, by which the unconscious closes up again’ (Lacan 1964: 146, 130). As one of the ‘four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis’ (along with repetition, the unconscious and the drive), transference-love is also an affirmation of a (non) relation, between the desire of the analyst and the desire of the patient.

This ‘relation’ or encounter is never conceived in any straightforward sense. It is ‘odd,’ eccentric to any intersubjective relation. As Lacan notes in Seminar VII, ‘It’s odd that in almost all languages happiness offers itself in terms of a meeting — tuch’ (Lacan 1959-60: 13). But psychoanalysis is suspicious of happiness (in Freud’s words, its job is to turn neurotic misery into ordinary unhappiness), and so this meeting never quite takes place: it’s an irrevocably missed encounter. If there’s happiness in psychoanalysis, it is, as Lacan will joke in Seminar XVII, the happiness of the phallus. Love also, as we all know, doesn’t lead to happiness except in fairy-tales, whose too-abrupt endings imply that ‘you don’t want to know anything about that,’ a kind of censorship of the aftermath. Love remains the narcissistic apparition of a symptom.

Which is why Lacan denounces the notion of an epistemophilic drive, a Wisstrieb. Rather than such a drive, the ‘three fundamental passions’ are love, hate, and ignorance (‘The Direction of the Treatment’, Lacan 1966b). No one wants to know of his own accord. So when Lacan declares ‘All true love turns to hate,’ he is noting that: knowledge is affective; that a shift in affect is a condition for the production of knowledge; that such knowledge brings neither power nor pleasure nor happiness. In this, Lacan’s position remains classically Freudian. In ‘Instincts and their Vicissitudes’ (1915), Freud had declared that ‘love’ and ‘hate’ were not symmetrical, and that they arose from different sources. If love begins as the auto-erotic capacity of ego to satisfy its drives before it passes to objects, it turns out that ‘[h]ate, as a relation to objects, is older than love’ (SE 14: 139). If then there is the appearance of a drive to know, this must be due to something extra, a kind of surplus bound to love. Whence Lacan’s doctrine of ‘the subject supposed to know’: ‘As soon as the subject who is supposed to know exists somewhere….there is transference’ (Lacan 1964: 232). And, again, in his ‘Introduction to the German Edition of the Ecrits’ (1973), Lacan puts it bluntly: ‘it is love that addresses itself to knowledge. Not desire’ (Lacan 2001: 558). Desire wants to know nothing about it.

But the knowledge accessible through love is not ‘truth’ — for Lacan, famously, the truth can only ever be ‘half-said’ — and it is more precisely a kind of a non-knowledge, given that it consists, first, of a semblance of knowledge, and, second, emerges as a consequence of the psychoanalytic treatment, as a contingent,

26 Russell Grigg related to me the following anecdote: when de Gaulle announced his retirement at a press-conference, his wife was also present. A journalist asked Madame de Gaulle how she felt about her husband’s retirement, to which she responded in a heavy French accent: ‘I am looking forward to a penis.’ The General immediately leapt in: ‘My wife means “happiness, happiness.”’
meaningless signifier: ‘In so far as the primary signifier is pure non-sense, it
becomes the bearer of the infinitization of the value of the subject, not open to
all meanings, but abolishing them all, which is different’ (Lacan 1964: 252). So if
love is, on the one hand, a response to the missed encounter in the real, love can
also be turned against itself through the clinic of analysis, love against love until
the subject confronts the apparition of the master to which he or she is subject (in
Lacanian algebra, the $S_I$, the master signifier).27 As Slavoj Žižek declares:

If the symptom in this radical dimension is unbound, it means
literally ‘the end of the world’ — the only alternative to the symptom
is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide, surrender to the death
drive even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe. That is
why the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic
process is identification with the symptom. The analysis achieves its
end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom,
the only support of his being (Žižek 1989: 75).

So if love builds a world, psychoanalysis is a praxis of world-destruction through
love. A non-apocalyptic apocalypse: the traversal of the fantasy, the negative
limning of the $S_I$, and the simultaneous suspension of any sense of existence. This
is undoubtedly why Žižek, following Lacan, is so strident about the relationship
between ethics and suicide in a real act: the ethical act, not giving way on your
desire, leads you to a space between-two-deaths, or subjective destitution.28 The
praxis that is psychoanalysis is the transferential working-through of (the lack of)
the world until the foundations of that world itself emerge in a kind of last
judgement. Where the lovin’ wannabe was, there an evacuated knowledge becomes
— at the cost, of course, of the subject itself. This is precisely the “erotic interment
procedure” of which I spoke above.

But this ‘love burial of the subject’ opens, in turn, further questions. Is it an
experience, a logical moment, or a real act?29 How does it arise in the praxis of the

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27 This is probably as good a moment as any to thank those whose own work on love has been crucial
for this article. What is a little bizarre is that three of them are literally masters, *domini*: Dominiek
Hoons, Dominic Pettman and Dominique Hecq. The other, Sigi Jöttkandt, shares the letters of her
Vorname with the founder of psychoanalysis.

28 See, in particular, Žižek’s take on Antigone, one of his staple references (and which guides his
interpretations of the films *Stromboli*, *Breaking the Waves*, etc.). See also Russell Grigg’s critique
of Žižek’s work on precisely this point, in “Absolute Freedom and Major Structural Change,”

29 One could then disagree with Zizek’s claim, cited above, that identification with the symptom is the
‘final’ Lacanian position on the end of psychoanalysis; in fact the situation is far less clear than this
declaration suggests (see *Seminar XXIII* on Joyce). On the question of the act as a logical moment,
see E. Pluth and D. Hoens, ‘What if the Other is Stupid? Badiou and Lacan on “Logical Time”’ in
P. Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum,
2004), pp. 182-190.
clinic? Can its processes be generalised beyond a strictly clinical situation? Is it in fact tantamount to a ‘cure’? Or is it a false exit? Should not rather the subject be treated to ‘partner’ their *sinthome*. What sort of being is at stake here? These questions take us beyond the scope of this article, and into the Bermuda Triangle of contemporary psychoanalytic disputes.…

4. Terminably interminable

The problem of love, present from the first, emerges in fits and starts until it becomes the very heart of psychoanalytic theory. (As Richard Hell and the Voidoids put it, ‘Love comes in spurts.’) It is the transference as an organ of crisis that delivers psychoanalysis’s ontology, an ontology that at once prevents psychoanalysis from ever being able to settle comfortably into the warm embrace of the hard sciences on the one hand, or into the clammy hands of philosophical ontologies, on the other. If it is true that psychoanalysis is essentially the greatest modern theory of love, it is also true that psychoanalysis, in the course of its ceaseless development and re-elaboration, constantly seems to forget the love at its heart. Such a forgetting means that psychoanalysis constantly forgets itself; an unfortunate situation for an enterprise supposedly founded on the therapeutic powers of anamnesis. Hence the consequences of transference’s crisis-status within analysis, as can be verified by the desperate attempts of so many post-Freudian orientations (whether ego-psychology, attachment theory, or CBT) to reduce its field of operations to those of egoistic defence, to animal ethology, to the ethical rituals of the counter-transference, or to games of ‘proper distancing.’

But neither Freud nor Lacan ever gave way on the ontological powers of love, and there’s no question that many post-Kleinian analysts have equally affirmed it in their own way. After all, “In the beginning of analytic experience…was love’ (Lacan 1960-61: 12).

But at its end…?

30 One of the symptomatic paradoxes in this regard is that the very problematic of ‘distancing’ has been considered, from Kant to the present, an emblematically *aesthetic* phenomenon. So when assembled psychoanalytic authorities begin to speak, without any reference whatsoever to aesthetics, of the importance of maintaining a proper distance in the analytic relationship, it is difficult not to detect more than a whiff of repression. See the amazing sequence of articles by: E. Kris, ‘Ego psychology and interpretation in psychoanalytic therapy,’ *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 20:15 (1951); R. Greenson, ‘Variations in Classical Psycho-Analytic Technique: An Introduction,’ *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 39 (1958), pp. 200-1; R. Loewenstein, ‘Remarks on Some Variations in Psycho-Analytic Technique,’ pp. 202-210; M. Bouvet, ‘Technical Variation and the Concept of Distance,’ pp. 211-221; A. Reich, ‘A Special Variation of Technique,’ pp. 230-234; S. Nacht, ‘Variations in Technique,’ pp. 235-237; R. Loewenstein, ‘Variations in Classical Technique: Concluding Remarks,’ pp. 240-2. This symposium is notable mainly insofar as Lacan destroys every one of its presumptions in ‘The Direction of the Treatment’ (1958), where he states, in direct riposte to Bouvet, that ‘to make distance the sole dimension in which the neurotic’s relations with the object are played out generates insurmountable contradictions’ (Lacan 1966b: 246-47).
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