THE ONE OR THE OTHER? ANXIETY FROM HEIDEGGER TO LACAN

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Whatever one's larger judgment of Heidegger's thought, it is hard not to admire the conceptual elegance of his theory of anxiety. It makes its appearance at a strategic point in *Being and Time*, following Heidegger's treatments of being-in-the-world, understanding, and state-of-mind, as well as his accounts of thrownness, falling, and *das Man* (the anonymous "*They*" that populates everyday reality). Only when that thicket of topics has been traversed does anxiety take centre stage.

Once he takes up the topic of anxiety, Heidegger immediately sets out to clarify a subtle but absolutely crucial point. The question is whether anxiety should be considered a physiological state, a kind of physical reaction to one or another external threat. Heidegger's answer is emphatic: the origin of anxiety is not physiological but existential. Anxiety thus has nothing to do with the physical pain of burning a finger on the stove. Nor is anxiety a psychic reaction to one or another anticipated impact on the organism. Anxiety arises not from any mechanical shock from outside oneself but is rather a reaction to an existential awareness of one's own being, a realization of one's exposure to awareness itself. As Heidegger summarizes these points: 'Only because Dasein is anxious in the very depths of its Being, does it become possible for anxiety to be elicited physiologically' (Heidegger 1962: 234).

To this assertion of the purely existential character of anxiety, Heidegger immediately adds that what is at stake in anxiety is the question of Dasein's wholeness. The example of fear had already shown that inflections of mood affect the whole sweep of Dasein's worldhood. Might anxiety then be less worrisome insofar as anxiety differs from fear in its lack of any definite object? Far from it! The very indefiniteness of anxiety is what grounds its potency. In Heidegger's account, anxiety arises from Dasein's fundamental being-as-a-whole. In anxiety, Dasein comes face to face with its own pure potentiality, its existential unity in relation to the world. As Heidegger says of it, 'anxiety individualizes Dasein for its ownmost Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1962: 232). Anxiety is a response to the dizziness of Dasein's raw exposure—at once and in its totality—to the lighting of Being.

The elegance of this definition is twofold. First, it neatly certifies Dasein's wholeness on the basis its own mode of being. Because anxiety is grounded in nothing but Dasein's encounter with itself and its relation to the world, anxiety comes to function as a kind of self-guarantee. It is for this reason, as Heidegger puts it, that 'anxiety individualizes Dasein and thus discloses it as "*solus ipse*".' Yet this individualizing result is in no way a matter of Dasein's cutting itself off from the outside world and shutting up within itself. Anxiety doesn't draw Dasein back from the world. On the contrary, anxiety arises precisely from Dasein's connectedness with Being. 'What [anxiety] does', says Heidegger, 'is precisely to bring Dasein face to face with its world as world, and thus bring it face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1962: 233).

Second, Heidegger compactly integrates the analysis of anxiety with the arc of topics that precede it. In particular, the motive for Dasein's falling into the inauthenticity of average everydayness (*Alltäglichkeit*) is located in Dasein's attempt to flee from anxiety. In coming to fear one or another particular wound or loss, Dasein evades its own totality by attaching its anxiety to one or another particular object. Heidegger thus defines fear as 'anxiety, fallen into the "world", inauthentic, and, as such, hidden from itself' (Heidegger 1962: 234). Dasein's most common mode of fleeing the anxious challenge of its own primordial essence is achieved by losing itself in the inauthentic posture of 'business as usual.'

In Heidegger's theory, anxiety mobilizes Dasein's own being, the primal existential sense of self, and does so precisely in and through being its experience of being confronted with the totality of Being. Dasein is anxious in confrontation with imposing sweep of the world. How, then, are we to situate Lacan's theory of anxiety in relation to Heidegger's?

On a first approach, it is the very symmetry and elegance of Heidegger's account that signals the problem. Where Heidegger's approach is theoretically satisfying for the way it defines anxiety in terms of the challenge of Dasein's very existence, the way in which Dasein's own being is called upon by the totality of the world it inhabits, anxiety for Lacan is emphatically ex-centric and is so in relation to a very particular stimulus. 'Anxiety', Lacan insists, 'resides in the subject's fundamental relationship [. . .] with the desire of the *Other'* (my emphasis; Lacan 2014: 27). According to Lacan, anxiety is triggered by the subject's primordial alienation in the fellow human being, the fact that the path by which the subject comes to itself necessarily begins outside itself. The problem, as Lacan puts it in a clever neologism, is not unnerving intimacy but unavoidable *extimacy*.[1]

Even on the basis of this first, rough approximation, we glimpse some major consequences of Lacan's approach that challenge Heidegger's entire outlook. As we just saw, Heideggerian Dasein becomes lost in the fallenness of the everyday as a means of evading a disarming exposure to the revelation of being that Dasein most fundamentally *is*. To this extent, inauthenticity appears as Dasein's flight from some more primordial existential encounter with itself. For Lacan, by contrast, the nascent subject is originally outside itself, *alienated in relation with the Other*—its fellow human being— and is so at the most archaic and fundamental level of its own being. If it is possible to speak of authenticity at all from the Lacanian standpoint, it is predicated upon winning some margin of separation from this originary Other, and of coming to know something of one's own desire in that margin.[2]

One of the more important implications of Lacan's one-hundred-eighty degree turn that places the origin of anxiety emphatically outside the subject, is the way that it appears to fulfil a requirement that Heidegger sets for himself. The reason is that Heidegger, too, speaks of authenticity that must be wrested from Dasein's prior sunkenness in the inauthenticity of everydayness. It is the inauthentic that most deserves the keynote Heideggerian phrasing of the

[1] For Lacan's first use of the term 'extimacy' see: Lacan, J. (1992: 139).

[2] It is worth noting, particularly in discussing Lacan's distance from Heidegger, that Lacan was consistently reluctant to use the term 'authenticity' in relation to the human subject, presumably to avoid the sense of unity and ownership that authenticity tends to imply.

'always already' (*immer schon*). As Heidegger himself says: '*Authentic Being-one's-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "they"; *it is rather an existentiell modification of the* "*they*"*—of the* "*they*" *as an essential existentiale*' (the italics here are Heidegger's own; see Heidegger 1962: 168).

Lacan is even more readily able to account for the emergence of authenticity from sunkenness in the inauthentic because for him the subject, by virtue of its inaugural alienation in the Other, does not bury itself in the 'They' as an escape from a prior, anxiety-producing encounter with itself. On the contrary, the subject's originary alienation in the Other implies that it is submerged in what Heidegger calls *das Man* from the very start.

If in this instance Lacan might be said in a certain sense to be truer to Heidegger's vision than Heidegger himself, the same holds for another, even more fundamental point of Heidegger's philosophy: his re-conceiving existence as *ek-sistence*. As Heidegger himself emphasizes, most clearly in his rejection of Sartre's existential voluntarism, the change of prefix is meant to emphasize that way in which Dasein is in some essential way outside and/or beyond itself.[3] It is not accidental, then, that Lacan enthusiastically seizes upon Heidegger's altered spelling—*ek*-sistence— as it captures precisely the elementally inside-out structure of subjecivity that Lacan wants to assert. Here again, Heidegger's own conceptual architecture seems less well-equipped than that of Lacan in making sense of Heidegger's own fundamental point.[4]

But all of this no doubt remains somewhat hasty and approximate. Let us attempt another beginning, going back briefly to some basics in pursuit of three additional points of comparison and contrast.

I

In rethinking the problem of anxiety, Lacan's most obvious innovation over Heidegger, the one Lacan himself highlights in the opening of his tenth seminar devoted expressly to the topic of anxiety, is to distance himself from the contrast Heidegger draws between anxiety and fear. For Heidegger, anxiety has no object. Dasein's favourite mode of fleeing the over-bearing discomfort of anxiety is thus to convert it into fear, which is a matter of turning away from the indefiniteness of anxiety by focusing upon one or another particular object of dread. For Lacan, by contrast, anxiety is essentially triggered by the subject's being confronted by the object. Anxiety, Lacan insists, is 'not without an object' (Lacan 2014: 88-9).

To be sure, the object Lacan has in mind is a very special one: his own *objet a*, which in some important ways does not fully qualify as an object at all. Lacan himself refers to it as a kind of non-objectal object. Lacan's 'return to the object' thus makes it all the more crucial to keep firm sight of the way that the *objet a* is a stand-in for *the lack* in the Other. The key to Lacan's theory of anxiety, indeed the cardinal point that orients Lacan's perspective more generally, is that the

[3] Heidegger distances himself from Sartre's existentialism most explicitly in his 'Letter on Humanism' of 1947. The text of the 'Letter' is contained in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings* 193-242 (ed.) D. Farrell Krell. San Francisco: HarperCollins.

[4] It is important to note that Heidegger employs the term 'ek-sistence' long after the publication of *Being and Time*. He introduces it in the 'Letter on Humanism'. See *Basic Writings* 228ff.

human subject locates itself in relation to the unknowable dimension in the Other—the perpetual enigma of the Other's desire.

What is lacking and unknown in the Other escapes registration in what Lacan calls 'the imaginary'.[5] Thus Lacan insists that 'man finds his home at a point located in the Other that lies beyond the image from which we are fashioned. This place represents the absence where we stand' (Lacan 2014: 47). The enigmatic locus at stake here belongs not to the imaginary but to the real, the uncanny upsurge of something beyond and outside of the image.[6] Lacan links the problem at stake to a brief but deeply suggestive passage in Freud's unpublished 1895 'Project for a Scientific Psychology'. Therein Freud notes the way in which the child divides the figure of the fellow human being between what it can recognize on the basis of similarities to its own body—precisely the sort of mirror recognition that Lacan associates with the imaginary—and a locus of something that is 'new and non-comparable', a zone of something unknown. The unrepresentable excess Freud calls *das Ding*—the Thing. Freud thus reserves in the heart of the familiar a locus of something excessive and unknowable. This uncognizable excess discerned in the Other will haunt all of the child's future attempts to interrogate the nature of objects.

For Lacan, this enigmatic locus of something uncognized in the Other is the root source of anxiety. 'Not only is [anxiety] not without object,' he says, 'but it very likely designates the most, as it were, profound object, the ultimate object, the Thing' (Lacan 2014: 7).[7] The challenge of the neighbour-Thing consists not simply in its being unknown but in the way that it raises the unsettling question of what object I am for the unknown desire of the Other.

The question presses with particular force in the drama of toilet training when the Other's demand for the regulation of the infant's bowels re-energizes anxiety about the unanswered question of what the Other wants. The Lacanian thesis thus goes beyond merely locating the source of anxiety in the fellow human being. It asserts, contrary to our fondest myth about childhood, that the primal source-trigger of anxiety is the mother herself. Lacan thus writes:

> What provokes anxiety…is not, contrary to what is said, the rhythm of the mother's alternating presence and absence. The proof of this is that the infant revels in repeating this game of presence and absence…The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely…when the mother is on his back all the while, and especially when she's wiping his backside.
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> Lacan 2014: 53-4

[5] Lacan's theoretical architecture rests on the notional triad of the imaginary (the coherence of objects), the symbolic (the structure and dynamics of language), and the real (which names what can be neither perceived nor even coherently thought). If, as we just said, what is unknown in the Other is not registered in the imaginary, it is that very unknown in and of the Other that will be ceaselessly sought in the functions of the symbolic.

[6] Eric Santner (2011) powerfully evokes this kernel of the real beyond the mirror image as 'a kind of shadow or stain in the mirror, the dark matter of a kind of negative of abyssal sublime, precisely what can *not* be fully reflected in the mirror and yet is there with a thing-like density and insistence.' See: *The Royal Remains. The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* 49. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

[7] In a recent book, I offer an extended discussion of the role of *das Ding* as the crucial element of Lacan's theory of the unconscious, particularly in connection with the question of the religious. See Boothby, R. (2023). *Embracing the Void: Rethinking the Origin of the Sacred*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

We might remark in passing how this Lacanian understanding of the dynamics of the mother/child relation at least partly echoes the account offered by Simone de Beauvoir. At a crucial point of her argument in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir draws on the Freudian Oedipus complex to account for the deep roots of ambivalence toward the feminine, though with the crucial proviso that we invert Freud's conception. The core of the Oedipus is not, as Freud thought, that the child must be separated from the mother by a threat of castration. On the contrary, the child is motivated to navigate its own separation, seeking to achieve an autonomy that can be won only by a certain rejection of the maternal embrace (de Beauvoir 1952). Lacan echoes this key point. He could well be paraphrasing de Beauvoir when he insists that 'it's not true that the child is weaned. He weans himself. He detaches himself from the breast' (de Beauvoir 1952: 327).[8]

It is in the light of this perspective that we can make sense of Lacan's comparison of the mother to the threatening spectre of a giant praying mantis (Lacan 2014). In the same stroke, we can interpret his characterization of the *objet a* as *un objet cessible*, a cedable or yieldable object. In the various incarnations of the *objet a,* most of them parts of the body, the subject's 'pound of flesh,' is exchanged or 'sacrificed' in order to open up and sustain a margin of separation from the Other.[9] It is from this angle of view that we can make some sense of Lacan's comparing the mother to a crocodile and the phallus to a stick with which to keep its jaws from snapping shut.

This discussion returns us to Heidegger, inasmuch as Lacan's *objet cessible* recapitulates something akin to Heidegger's notion of an escape from anxiety made possible by means of focusing on an object. What Lacan calls *objet a* ultimately derives from a pure void, a pure function of lack and absence. Yet this lack is successively, and quite literally, fleshed out in a series of palpable objects—in the first instance parts of the body (breast, faeces, penis, etc.)[10] The result is that a lack originally and essentially grounded in the unfathomable opacity of the Other is put at a distance and then pressed into an economy of exchange by means of crucial objectifications. It is for this reason that Lacan can propose that, in its ultimate meaning and function, 'sacrifice is not at all intended to be an offering, nor a gift, both of which are propagated in a quite different dimension, but the capture of the Other in the web of desire' (Lacan 2014: 277). The necessity of such an economy of exchange is by no means exhausted by its infantile enactment. On the contrary, says Lacan, 'we don't live our lives, whoever we are, without tirelessly offering to goodness knows what unknown divinity the sacrifice of some little mutilation, whether valid or not, that we impose upon ourselves in the field of our desires' (Lacan 2014: 277).

[8] Just to be clear, to my knowledge Lacan never expressly cites de Beauvoir's treatment of weaning. Nevertheless, Lacan's position sounds remarkably similar: 'It's not longing for the maternal breast that provokes anxiety, but its imminence' (Lacan 2014: 53). Later in the same seminar, Lacan returns to the point: 'The most decisive moment in the anxiety at issue, the anxiety of weaning, is not so much when the breast falls short of the subject's need, it's rather that the infant yields the breast to which he is appended as a portion of himself' (Lacan 2014: 313).

[9] 'In the body there is always, by virtue of this engagement in the signifying dialectic, something that is separated off, something that is sacrificed, something inert, and this something is the pound of flesh' (Lacan 2014: 219).

[10] 'The most decisive moment in the anxiety at issue, the anxiety of weaning, is not so much when the breast falls short of the subject's need, it's rather that the infant yields the breast to which he is appended as a portion of himself' (Lacan 2014: 313).

To which we can add another crucial point. Because the initial figurations of the Lacanian *objet a* are originally materialized by specific parts of the body, Lacan's conception of anxiety is everywhere tied firmly to questions of the body. The contrast with Heidegger is striking. As many commentators have remarked, a substantive exploration of the problem of embodiment is strangely neglected in Heidegger's philosophy.[11] For Lacan, the experience of anxiety is inseparable from aspects of the subject's experience of embodiment, just as its accompanying ideation is closely bound up with the body's imaginary representations.

II

This discussion of the materialization of the *objet a* and its role in an economy of exchange provides a ready link to the child's entry into speech, the ultimate economy of exchange. Lacan theorizes that in the primal drama with the maternal Other, the inchoate cry of the infant becomes in itself a ceded object, indeed the very first such object, yielded into the space between subject and the Other. 'This manifestation of anxiety,' he says, 'coincides with the very emergence in the world of he who is going to be the subject. This manifestation is his cry…this first effect of cession…the nursling can't do anything about the cry that slips out of him. He has yielded something and nothing will ever conjoin him to it again' (Lacan 2014: 326).

With the infant's cry, we arrive at the most elemental level of the dialectic, tensed by anxiety, between the subject and the Other. Yet how exquisitely the structure of that dialectic is already reflected in this most primitive instantiation! The cry escapes from the infant's mouth involuntarily, and yet the infant has, with the full ambiguity of the word, 'expressed' something in two senses: something has literally been pushed out and expelled, but the infant has also truly expressed *itself*, opening up a space of relation with the Other and depositing something of itself into that space.

If the first eruptions of the voice are in this way inflected with anxiety, and inevitably so, in as much as they enter and begin to shape the emerging interval between the subject and the Other, they are also destined, with the unfolding of the signifier and its network, to become the means by which the question of the Other, the enigma of *das Ding*, will be ceaselessly re-posed.[12] In fact, isn't this the most elemental implication of Lacan's theory of the signifier, perhaps precisely what he had in mind by claiming that he had defined the signifier as no one else had dared? In every entry into language, in every iteration of signifying material, there resounds some echo of the unanswered and unanswerable question of the Other to whom it has been addressed.

[11] In fact, Heidegger's neglect of the body and its functions was so frequently commented upon by scholars that Kevin Aho came to Heidegger's defence, devoting an entire book to a more careful reading of the implications of Heidegger's viewpoint for questions of embodiment. See: Aho, K. A. (2010). *Heidegger's Neglect of the Body*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

[12] 'Here we're touching on the very things that makes the relation to the Other possible, that is, on that whence emerges the fact that there is such a thing as a signifier. This site whence emerges the fact that there is such a thing as the signifier is, in one sense, the site that cannot be signified. It is what I call the site of the lack-of-signifier' (Lacan 2014: 134).

To this brief sketch, it is vital to add a further dimension: that of the subject's own question, the question of the *subject's* desire. If every play of the signifier at least implicitly resumes an interrogation of the unknown in the Other, what is ultimately at stake is the subject's own coming-to-be, the subject's own question. This even more elusive stake of the game is rooted in the real of the subject's mute jouissance. 'What anxiety targets in the real,' says Lacan, 'includes the *x* of a primordial subject moving towards his advent as subject'…the subject of jouissance (Lacan 2014: 173).

With these reflections, we are not as distant from Heidegger's problematics as it might appear. The crux of Heidegger's concept of anxiety is centred on the sheer openness of Dasein's disclosive clearing, its radical exposure to Being. The Lacanian conception echoes something of this Heideggerian thematic of the anxious open. But Lacan situates that opening in the locus of the Other. It is in that locus, and in the most absolutely fundamental sense, that the space of the unknown opens up for the human being. Yet here, too, Lacan's reposing of the problem makes a significant advance over that of Heidegger. The reason is that Lacan enables us to see much more precisely how and why anxiety, and the primordial horizon of the question in the Other that provokes it, are intrinsically linked with the acquisition and future functioning of language. Heidegger was keenly aware of the need to interrogate the disclosive power of language. Yet, in comparison with the complex and nuanced approach of Lacan, grounded in the primordial relation with the maternal Other, Heidegger's assertion that 'language is the house of Being,' for all its poetic evocativeness, remains vague and abstract.

III

Let us venture a last remark relevant to the psychoanalytic situation itself. The problem is not *das Ding* in and by itself, but rather what we have done to tame or domesticate it, to defensively position ourselves in relation to it. The most basic means by which this accommodation is achieved is the construction of fantasy. And the ground of fantasy can be linked—Lacan refers to it explicitly in the tenth seminar— with what Freud called the *proton pseudos*, the original lie (Lacan 1992: 73). Freud's account of it, clearly intended as an illustration of *das Ding*, focuses on a young woman, Emma, whose phobia of entering shops Freud traces to a childhood experience in which an old shopkeeper groped at her genitals through her clothes. The traumatic potential of the experience had less to do with the groping *per se*, than with the way in which it triggered a confrontation with the then-unanswerable, even unposable, question of what the groper was after.

Emma's phobia crystalizes when, years later, she inexplicably experiences a twinge of sexual arousal when two shop assistants appeared to laugh at her clothing. The two episodes were linked by the assistants' laughter, which recalled the leering grin of the lecherous old shopkeeper.

How, then, to understand the triggering of the delayed trauma in the second incident? The crucial factor is the passage through puberty that has occurred in the meantime. In the light of that passage, the primary mode of the subject's defence against the original attack, the *proton pseudos*, no longer functioned to protect her from the traumatic impact. That protective function was provided by the focus on clothing, the most innocent element in the original scene, indeed, the element that stood, quite literally, between the groping hands and her own body. The focus

on the idea of clothing thus came to play a key defensive role, substituting for the real target of the attack, and thereby shielding her from the truly intolerable feature of the experience: the unknown and threatening intention of the shopkeeper. The *Vorstellung* of clothes functioned above all to cover the nakedness of *das Ding*.

The larger lesson Freud draws from this vignette is that we all carry within us some version of such a *proton pseudos*. Such is the fundamental claim of the entire Freudian experience and the ultimate *raison d'être* of analysis: at some level we have always already lied to ourselves. At the most primitive level of the subject's constitution, we have defended ourselves against the unthinkability of *das Ding* by constructing a tissue of symptomatic falsehood.

What makes this final comment relevant to Heidegger is that he, too, is centrally concerned with a loss of truth, both in every individual human Dasein and in Dasein's epochal history since the first inception of the question of being among the ancient Greeks. Dasein is said by Heidegger to be fundamentally claimed by untruth. Indeed, human reality is suspended between truth and untruth, between revealment and concealment.

But this Heideggerian appreciation of the darkness that necessarily accompanies the light of the clearing tends to be cast more in the guise of forgetfulness than of falsehood. Thus Heidegger relishes the way in which the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, is constructed by the addition of the privative alpha to the root word *lethe*, which means 'forgetting'. Truth is fundamentally an un-forgetting, a dis-closing. The emergence of truth is a matter of overturning some previous obliviousness, of calling back to mind what has been allowed to slip into obscurity.

By contrast, the psychoanalytic conception, taking our clue from the contrast between *lethe* and *pseudos*, is centred on the way in which the subject is actively invested in the untruth, the way in which the subject has always already been living a lie. Said otherwise, psychoanalysis insists that the One of the subject, the 'mineness' of subjectivity so central to Heidegger's thought, is always already split, already compromised in relation with the Other.

To conclude: I've tried to show some of the ways in which Lacan's insistence on the subject's alienation in the Other departs from some of Heidegger's key claims while also making better sense of some of Heidegger's own views. Perhaps the ultimate confirming example can be linked with Heidegger's insistence on the paradox that Dasein's being-at-home coincides precisely with its not-being-at-home. As Heidegger himself puts it:

> When Dasein "understands" uncanniness in the everyday manner, it does so by turning away from it in falling; in this turning-away, the "not-at-home" gets 'dimmed down'. Yet the everydayness of this fleeing shows phenomenally that anxiety, as a basic state-of-mind, belongs to Dasein's essential state of Being-in-the-world. [. . .] *From an existential-ontological point of view, the "not-at-home" must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon.*
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> Heidegger 1962: 234

For Lacan, the subject's primordial relation to the Other implies that the subject is from the start fundamentally outside itself. For precisely this reason, Lacan is able to show, expanding on Freud's own treatment of the uncanny, why what is fearful and uncanny (*unheimlich*) is merely a topological twist of what is familiar and reassuring (*heimlich*).

Perhaps it is at this point that we can best mark Lacan's distance from Heidegger's distinctly philosophical commitments and even from (some) philosophical thinking as such. Where Heidegger remains committed to the One of the subject, the 'mineness' of Dasein that remains so central to his thought, psychoanalysis faces us with the splitting of the subject in its relation to the Other. The subject theorized by Lacan is fundamentally and inescapably external to itself. Lacan leaves us with the paradoxical conclusion that, strangely enough, the *intimate* really is possible only in and through the *extimate*. The subject is at home only when it passes outside itself. The subject's only path to itself passes through the Other.

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