

## PLATO'S GOOD FOR LACAN\*

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This paper is about sex. And if it is about sex, it is about number.

In the final weeks of the Seminar entitled *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*<sup>1</sup> Lacan identifies what has been a theme, perhaps the major one, of that year: they have been exploring what he terms the subjective positions of being. He sets up this triadic schema to help orientate his listeners:

KNOWLEDGE

SUBJECT

SEX

What we have here is a very simple version of a schema that Lacan goes on to develop over the course of seven or eight weeks. He relates this triadic formulation to his other triad, the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. He refers it to his topographical tool, the Moebius strip. He brings in his reading of Descartes's cogito; he unravels a theory of game he finds in Pascal; he refers to the biology of uni-cellular organisms which inhabit a twilight zone between plant and animal life. However, during these weeks the most repeated reference is to Plato. It is with one reference to Plato that this paper will concern itself. What use, what good is it for Lacan's endeavour?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Lacan. *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis, Seminar XII, 1964-65*. Trans. by C. Gallagher (unpublished).

At this point in his teaching, Lacan found it necessary to propose an ontology of the subject of the unconscious and it is with these three terms and through these references that he does so. That his discussion is difficult to understand should not surprise. Regardless of the school of one's psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytic training all can acknowledge the complexity of the human subject's relation to knowledge and to sex. Lacan who would not recklessly respond to a demand does so on this occasion: he responds to a demand not from his students but from psychoanalysis itself. In his address to this Congress last year in a paper entitled *Being, Knowing and Sexual Difference* Cormac Gallagher gave a comprehensive account of the *Crucial Problems Seminar* and highlighted its call:

An articulated notion of this subject is the primary requirement for the legitimate practice of psychoanalysis and for its establishment as a logically coherent discipline. To put it another way, it is the responsibility of analysts to establish for themselves and to communicate to those in other fields what the ontology of the subject is from the moment that there is an unconscious.<sup>2</sup>

Lacan's reference to Plato is, I believe, one way into this ontology of the subject. What I will be focusing on might help in our grasping a sense of something that is, by definition, impossible to know. The reference to Plato is a way to comprehend, in as much as this is possible, the subject's relation to sex, or to put it more accurately, the subject's relation to what Lacan calls the real of sex. To do so I will be committing the offence of ignoring to too large an extent the third member of this triad. I can only stress at this point the importance of the relations of the three together in this proposed account of the subject of the unconscious. Before I introduce you to the reference to Plato, therefore, to make up for the one-sidedness of my presentation I will quote you Lacan's own summary of the interplay of the three:

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<sup>2</sup> C. Gallagher. 'Being, Knowing and Sexual Difference' in *The Letter*, Spring 1997. p.6

Like in the game of love, of amora, where scissors, stone and paper catch up on one another indefinitely in a round, stone breaking scissors, paper enveloping stone, scissors cutting paper, you can state in an analogy which undoubtedly conceals something more complex, ... the three terms of my last discourses ... The unconscious is a knowledge, whose subject remains undetermined, in the unconscious. What does it know? Well sex, and it is not by chance ... that the meaning of the Freudian doctrine is that sex is one of the stumbling points, around which turns this triple relationship, this economy where each one of these terms is referred on from one to the other in accordance with a relationship which, at first approach, may seem to be the one through which I introduce you to it, a relationship of circular dominance, the subject being undetermined in knowledge, which is brought to a halt before sex, which confers on the subject this new sort of certainty through which his place as subject being determined and only being able to be so from the experience of the cogito, with the discovery of the unconscious, of the radically, fundamentally sexual nature of human desire, the subject takes his new certainty, that of finding his lair in the pure default of sex.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of the unconscious receives determination in the face of indeterminacy in and around these three poles: the subject itself constituted in the signifier which represents it for another signifier - this subject has a materiality but it is not the same materiality as we presume in our more literal-minded moments. It is a subject whose status is not easily given, whose status requires ongoing interrogation in itself and in the modes of thought that are available to conceptualise it. Knowledge for this 'subject of a not-knowing'<sup>4</sup> is founded on knowledge refused. At one level it is a knowledge that it doesn't want to know; while at another level it is a knowledge that,

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<sup>3</sup> J.Lacan, op.cit. (Week XIX), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> ibid, XVIII, p.6

paradoxically it is impossible to know. It is a knowledge foreclosed, it is an encounter extremely difficult to suggest conceptually. It is that which stands at the third pole of this triad. It is sex.

For this reason the exploration of the subject of the unconscious discovered by Freud requires all the help we can get. Lacan's selection of references - to surface-theory mathematics, to the biology of micro-organisms and to difficult conceptualisations from the tradition of Plato - is not deliberately obtuse. For such an investigation it was and is necessary to use modes of conceptualisation that move us beyond the simplistic everyday presuppositions that orientate us in our simplified spatio-temporal sense of reality.

What Plato provides for Lacan is just such a conceptualisation, that suggests a way into what is involved in the relation between the subject and sex. It is a conceptualisation that is by definition very difficult to grasp. Aristotle, for example, no stranger to the complexities and gymnastics of logic did not like it - he did not want to know about it.

Before I introduce you to this mode of thought a few words to remind you who, or what, Plato is. No more than the subject of the unconscious Plato's ontological status is difficult to pin down. Plato, Play-Dough, in the hands of centuries of philosophers mucking with the malleable texts, has turned up in as many shapes as play dough permits. However, just as Play Dough has a certain texture that sets a limit to what can be formed so to Plato there are ascribed certain texts from which he may be formed.

The texts most associated with Plato are those strange philosophical writings deceptively described as *Dialogues*. Written almost two and a half thousand years ago their defiance of any attempt to systematise them, to draw from them an easily communicated world-view, has guaranteed their survival and continued interest. For the most part they are dramatisations of imagined conversations held between historical figures in fifth century Athens. They were composed in the fourth century by Plato who would not have been alive to meet, never mind converse with, some of the figures he portrays. Often led by the character Socrates these talks meander in and around a chosen topic such as knowledge or pleasure, the statesman or the sophist. The expectation that they will come to a definition or account, a *logos*, is more often than not disappointed. Conclusions, when they are reached, often have followed a

route whose logic is somewhat dubious. Mythic constructions are brought in when logic reaches its limit in the search for a truth. Ethical questions become ontological questions; mathematics explains the soul, geometry the cosmos. Within all this and with all the possibilities of characterisation to hand Plato does not name himself as present in any of the *Dialogues* - at most he is spoken of as absent due to illness in the *Phaedo*, the moving dramatisation of Socrates' last hours. To search for the actual thought of the man Plato in these *Dialogues* is fruitless. In his writing, what is represented is the process of philosophy, the conversation from which bits and pieces of the truth might fall. What we witness in the texts of Plato are representations of scraps of talk that might be heard in the circle around an ethical man of the likes of Socrates.

There is, however, another source from which to glean Plato's thought. There is a tradition dating from his own lifetime which has handed down Plato's oral teaching, his lectures and seminars in the Academy which he founded. The idea has often been that here we get his actual thought free from the elusive playfulness of the dialogue form. This tradition of the unwritten teachings has answered the demand for an undiluted but none the less complex metaphysics of Plato. It is to this tradition that Lacan points us when he refers to Plato's Good. However dubious the form of this teaching's transmission, we have attached to Plato's name some very interesting conceptualisations recorded in the works of commentators on philosophy starting in the works of Aristotle himself.

In these ancient writings reference is made to a lecture given by Plato entitled *On the Good, peri tagathou*, and apparently this lecture created something of a stir. Aristoxenos, a contemporary of Aristotle's, gives us this report:

Aristotle was wont to relate that most of those who heard Plato's lecture *On the Good* had the following experience. Each came thinking he would be told something about one of the recognised human goods, such as Wealth, Health or Strength, or, in sum, some marvellous Happiness. But when it appeared that Plato was to talk on Mathematics and Numbers and Geometry and Astronomy, leading up to a statement that the Good was Unity, or One, they were overwhelmed by the paradox of the

whole matter. Some then sneered at the whole thing and others vilified it.<sup>5</sup>

So it seems to have been Plato who set the precedent of perplexing and outraging audiences at lectures by introducing mathematics where they are not expected! What then were these mathematics? Let's turn to Aristotle where we hear of them first; and furthermore, we are given an account, albeit misrepresentative, of their relation to Plato's *Theory of Ideas*.

We have to keep in mind when we read Aristotle's lecture notes, those that have come down to us under the title *Metaphysics*, that this student is not an honest witness to his Master's thought and furthermore he was no doer when it came to using rhetorical and logical devices to undermine his Master's thought. It was, in fact, the presence of mathematics, *ta mathematika*, in Plato's account that was particularly the object of Aristotle's drubbings.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is largely his history of the philosophy of first things, *ta prota*, the primal elements and causes of the world. These first things are what Aristotle terms *archai*, a word usefully carrying the sense of origin and principle. He spends a lot of time dealing with what he understands to be Plato's *archai*.

Naming Plato among those philosophers who have posited a more abstract account of things than those termed the physicists, he begins from the famous *Theory of Ideas*. This theory, otherwise called the *Theory of Forms*, is often implicit and sometimes explicitly referred to in the *Dialogues*. It was developed over the course of Plato's career but given the author's understanding of philosophy it was never given definitively. Despite that, for our purposes here I will put it into a nutshell: This theory posits an intelligible world of Forms, *ta eide*, otherwise referred to as Ideas, *hai ideai*. This is the realm of the unchanging things which determines in some ambiguous way, described usually by the term participation, the changing world around us, the world we perceive. A Form then, is like some kind of archetype which predicates ontologically and logically the perceptible

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<sup>5</sup> Aristoxenus. *Elements of Harmony*, II, 30-31. Trans after: J.N. Findlay, *Plato's Unwritten Doctrines* (1974) p.413

instantiations of the transcendent world. This table, which will not last for ever, is a table because it participates, somehow or other, in the intranscendent form of table.

Aristotle's account of Plato's first things begins with these forms and asks where they came from. It is then that he introduces the mathematical conceptualisation we have been tracking down today. He says that the forms originate from the interaction of the principle of being called the One, *to hen*, and the principle of matter termed the indeterminate two or dyad, *he aoristos duas*. To simplify Aristotle's account I have reduced his presentation to the following equations:<sup>6</sup>

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|--|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| I. the One + the indeterminate dyad                  | give rise to | the Forms, the Ideas                 |
| II. the principle of Being + the principle of matter | give rise to | the real things =<br>the Forms/Ideas |
| III. the Ideas / the Forms + the indeterminate dyad  | give rise to | the perceptibles                     |

Aristotle's account in Book One of *Metaphysics* is not sympathetic to this explanation of things. Aristotle did not like the mathematicisation of the universe.<sup>7</sup> This trend, initiated by Pythagoras, and carried on by Plato was the main focus of the work in the *Academy* after Plato's death. Speusippus, his successor, put mathematics to the fore of the institution above whose entrance was inscribed: 'Let no-one enter who is without a knowledge of geometry!'. Aristotle from across town in his Lyceum saw mathematics as the main point of difference in the battle between the Schools.

In the account in *Metaphysics 1* the details of Aristotle's differences with Plato need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that Aristotle was very uncomfortable with the notion of the indeterminate dyad. Indeterminacy he could deal with but a dyadic indeterminacy was not going to be acceptable to his anti-mathematical stance. It is while refuting the idea that such a dyadic

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<sup>6</sup> Note: in these overly simplified equations '+' stands for whatever it is that Plato suggests by the idea of participation.

<sup>7</sup> I heard this neat formulation in conversation with Professor John Dillon.

principle could generate the other numbers that quite suddenly he calls on the example of sexual difference to support his knowingly misrepresenting argument. Aristotle wants to separate the concept of indeterminacy and the concept of the dyad. The example of sexual difference might seem to show that the dyad component could be dropped from the formulation. Taking the female to represent the principle of indeterminacy and the male to represent the principle of limit he says:

Such is the relation of the male [*to arren*] to the female [*to thelu*]: the female is impregnated [*pleroutai*] by one covering [*ocheia*], but the male can impregnate [*pleroi*] many [*polla*]. And these are imitations of those principles.<sup>8</sup>

This settles the argument for Aristotle and the indeterminate principle has its dyadic nature removed so that it is the same indeterminate principle as that posited by the earliest physicists beginning with Anaximander. What we are left with is a straightforward distinction between male and female based on their functions in the act of impregnation. And this straightforward distinction is deemed analogous to that between the principle of limit represented by the male and the principle of indeterminacy undyadically represented by the female. Aristotle, the biologist, reduces sexual difference to that determined by a function in fertilisation. What is extraordinary are the terms in which he makes this point. Rather than use the words for a man and a woman he uses strange neuter forms: *to arren* and *to thelu*, the male and the female. He uses a very ambiguous word for 'impregnate': *pleroun* can also mean to pleasure somebody. Instead of using the plural feminine of many he uses the plural neuter, *polla*. Neuter is of indeterminate gender, indeterminate whether male or female. In the very terms with which Aristotle tries to do away with it there remains a dyadic indeterminacy and most interestingly it is illustrated with a reference to sex. Lacan does not mention this text in his discussion and I do not suggest reading too much into it. However, it is very curious that in his refutation of Plato's conceptualisation he offers this

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle. *Metaphysics* 988a 5 - 8, my translation.

example and in these strange terms. Instead of reaching a straightforward delineation on the one hand, between the limit and the non-numerical unlimited and on the other between the male and the female there remains an indeterminacy that could only be described as dyadic.

At this point I have to go back to something I mentioned in my paper here last year.<sup>9</sup> When Lacan says that the psychoanalyst is the presence of the sophist of our time he goes on to make a distinction:

The psychoanalyst is the presence of the sophist in our time, but with a different status from which the reason has emerged ... why these sophists operated with so much force and also without knowing why. The moment of force is based on something that analysis teaches us: the fact is that at the root of every dyad there is the sexual dyad. The masculine and the feminine (*le masculine et le féminin*). I say it like that because there is a tiny oscillation in the expression if I were to say the male and the female (*le male et la femelle*).<sup>10</sup>

Lacan is pointing to a distinction Aristotle wanted to refuse but it is betrayed perhaps in the form of his words. Aristotle, in the middle of a refutation of Plato that would be more worthy of a sophist, does not want to know of a dyadic indeterminacy that perhaps is prior to this empirically-minded dialectician's bi-polar oppositions of male and female. Lacan's second dyad, *le male et la femelle*, is the distinction based on function in fecundation. It is the distinction Aristotle wants. Yet his language carries the indeterminacy of the first of Lacan's dyads almost perhaps more blatantly than is possible in the French.

The notion that at the root of every dyad, every dialectical pairing, every signifying articulation there is the sexual dyad is suggested here by Lacan. A few seminars later he refers to Plato's conceptualisation to support it. He calls the conceptualisation Plato's Good since that is the name it

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<sup>9</sup> B. O'Donnell. 'The Sophist and the Psychoanalyst' in *The Letter*, Spring 1997.

<sup>10</sup> J. Lacan, op.cit. This quote is from the seminar of 12.5.65.

acquired through its supposed first exposure at the famous lecture on the Good. And it was in the account of the lecture in the works of a certain Simplicius that Lacan says he happened upon a statement of this conceptualisation. Simplicius, writing almost a thousand years after the lecture was a neo-Platonist commentator on the works of Aristotle. From within the tradition of Plato, rejigged by Plotinus, Simplicius is a very sympathetic exegete of the work of the Master of the other School. Given the interval of time we do not have to worry whether Simplicius' is giving an accurate report of Plato's actual oral teaching. What his report provides is a very clear and interesting statement of how the Platonic conceptualisation was being understood in Neo-Platonic thought. And what is important for us here is that it is to this statement of it that Lacan directs us:

Now, as I told you, the idea of the idea, the root of every institution, the establishment of the symbolic in the real, Plato's Good, to call it by its name is nothing other than number. And I indicated to you the last time my references in Simplicius and his testimony about a certain lecture by Plato. I would like if one of my listeners would take it as a matter, an opportunity and a pretext for a more developed research.<sup>11</sup>

In what remains of this paper, which was prompted by this suggestion of Lacan, I will present Simplicius' account of Plato's Good. I will then refer back to the seminars preceding the one just quoted in order to indicate how it might be said that Plato's good for Lacan.

Simplicius begins his account by locating the concepts under discussion:

Plato does not say that the Ideas are beyond heaven since they are not located in space at all. However, he says that there is a limitless element [*to apeiron*] both in perceptible things and in the Ideas. For they say that Plato spoke of the One and the

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<sup>11</sup>ibid. This quote is from the seminar of 16.6.65.

indeterminate dyad as the principles of perceptible things and that he also said that the indeterminate dyad was even among the mental things [*en tois noetois*]; and positing the big and the small as principles he said that they were the case of the limitless there. He said these things in his discourses on the Good at which Aristotle and Heracleides and Hestaios and other companions of Plato were present and they wrote down these enigmatic utterances.<sup>12</sup>

Simplicius goes on to quote Porphyry's explanation of the concepts we are chasing. Porphyry (234 - 305 AD) was the editor of Plotinus (205 - 270 AD) and one of the keenest exegetes in the tradition of ancient philosophy. Through Simplicius we hear the following from Porphyry:

Plato posited the more and the less, the too much and the too slight as being of the nature of the limitless. For wherever they are present proceeding through intensification and through flaccidity, they do not stand still and they do not limit that which they participate in but they go on towards the indeterminacy of the limitless [*to tes apeirias aoriston*].<sup>13</sup>

Porphyry then gives an illustration of the concept of the indeterminate dyad:

Let us take a limited magnitude like a cubit (roughly a meter in the metric scale) and divide it into two parts, leaving one half-cubit undivided, and dividing the other and adding it bit by bit to the undivided portion: we shall then have two parts of the cubit, one proceeding interminably towards increasing smallness and the other towards increasing bigness. And we shall never reach the indivisible by such division of parts since a cubit is continuous [*suneches*] and a continuum always divides

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<sup>12</sup> Simplicius. *On Aristotle's Physics 202b 36*. A full reference: *Simplicii in Physicorum III 4* (Arist. p.202b36) in H. Diels, ed., *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, ix, Berlin 1882 - 95.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

into divisibles. This cutting which leaves no gap reveals a certain limitless nature locked up in the cubit, or rather more than one such nature, one proceeding towards the big and the other proceeding towards the small. In these the indeterminate dyad is seen to be constituted from a factor which tends towards the big and a factor which tends towards the small.<sup>14</sup>

Into this incessant dyadic movement on one side towards but not reaching an absolute plenitude and on another towards but not reaching annihilation there needs to be introduced a limiting principle:

These properties are found in continuous bodies and in numbers ... The dyad is the first among ... numbers but in itself it is indeterminate and it is determined through participation in the one. For the dyad is limited in so far as it becomes a single Form. The one and the dyad are therefore the elements of number, the one limiting and formative, the other indeterminate in excess [*huperoche*] and deficiency [*elleipsis*].<sup>15</sup>

It is very interesting that the word used here for excess, *huperoche*, is built from the word we had earlier in Aristotle for the act of fertilisation, *ocheia*. In the description of one side of the movement within the indeterminate dyad is the notion of a going beyond the sexual act of fertilisation in the direction of a too much.

This description of the indeterminate dyad reveals very interesting characteristics: the absence of limit, the absence of gap, in other words the lack of lack. And here we meet with Lacan's description of the real as that which does not lack anything. And furthermore this indeterminacy, despite Aristotle's discomfort, is dyadic. It is therefore useful to Lacan as a reference in his interrogation of what he calls the real of sex.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

Let us return to the schema from the final weeks of the *Crucial Problems* seminar. It is not possible here to explore all the implications of this schematic presentation of the subjective positions of being but a few indications of its possibilities will hopefully be elucidated.

Lacan's account of the effect of the Cartesian cogito is that it introduced a split between knowledge and truth. He says that from Descartes on knowledge is defined as accumulatable knowledge and it is this idea of knowledge that grounds, for example, modern science and modern capitalism.

But this knowledge excludes the question of truth. The certainty of this knowledge requires the subject to disappear in respect to this knowledge. This side of the triad is marked by the term *Entzweiung*, which means split in two and it is so used by Freud. It is the place of the symptom; it is the place of compulsion, *Zwang*, and is the 'incarnation' of what is arriving from the two other sides: the side between the subject and sex carries the term 'truth' and the side between sex and knowledge is described by the term 'sense'. This third pole, which is perhaps the first pole is;

... this unknown real ... this real that is impossible to exhaust, which is the real of sex, which up to now we only accede through disguises, through deputies, through the transposition of the masculine/feminine opposition into the active/passive opposition, for example, or the seen/not seen, etc ...<sup>16</sup>

Thus we are returned to the dyad before the dyads, the indeterminate sexual dyad. And it is here that Lacan refers to Plato's embarrassment with the function of this dyad in relation to the dialectic which he founded. The indeterminate dyad is 'the stumbling block to the establishment of being and the one.'<sup>17</sup> Plato recognised it but was unsure how to handle it. Aristotle tried to subdue it and suggest in its place a symmetrical opposition between elements of the dyad. And interestingly, as we have seen, his reference is to

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<sup>16</sup> J. Lacan. op.cit. This quote is from the seminar of 9.6.65.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

the dyad of male and female - what Lacan describes as a deputy or disguise for the true relation in the dyad. Lacan takes up this conceptualisation to indicate the assymetry in what is termed sex: 'The 2 relationship that there is in sex is an assymetrical relationship ...'.<sup>18</sup> Lacan goes on to say that it is to the place of this indeterminate dyad of sex that analytic experience is led because it is somewhere there that the *objet a* is functioning. And it is consequentially an investigation of this object of psychoanalysis that, as we have heard today, occupied the next year of Lacan's Seminar.

In conclusion then what light might this conceptualisation cast on Lacan's thinking?

Lacan describes the relation between the subject of the unconscious and the signifier in the following terms: the signifier represents the subject for another signifier. The subject is constituted through the play of, let's say, two signifiers, a dyad of signifiers. The signifier has as elements the bipolar opposition of phonemes, dyads of phonemes. The play of these dyads can only occur in a field where there is a gap, where there is possible alternation, a dialectic of absence and presence. It cannot occur in a continuum. What Lacan's reference to Plato suggests is that before these dyads come into play there is an indeterminate dyad, a dyad that defies signification. This is the place of sex, the place that it is impossible to know. This is the place where the dyad of subject and object lacks any possible determination because it has not come to be. The subject emerges from a place of polymorphous perversity through a loss, the establishing of a gap, through the falling away of the object that causes desire. Confronted with the impossibility of signification, the lack of signifier, the subject emerges through the coming into play of a signifier of lack. The encounter with this real of sex is an encounter that cannot be known; it is an encounter foreclosed. But it is anterior to the emergence of the dyadic play of signifiers that constitute the subject. These signifiers in turn may be unknown but unknown in that they are repressed and their effects return in the formations of the unconscious.

The encounter with the impossible is preiliminary to the emergence of the possible and language is a field of the possible. For this to occur, an object

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

is lost so that the subject so established has the status of a remainder after the object.

Plato's One that brings limit to the indeterminate dyad we may cast as a double-sided representative: on one side it is the introduction of the symbolic, of the cut: it is the representative of symbolic castration. On the other side it is the *objet a*, the lost object, cause of desire: that which through its loss is the cause of the symbolic.

Plato's Good is a very useful reference for grasping a sense of these fundamental ideas in Lacan's thinking. Along with the topological interior eight, the Klein bottle and the *aoristos*, that is, edgeless Moebius strip, Lacan recommends this conceptualisation gleaned from the tradition of Plato's teaching. It is another means by which to speak of that which is beyond the limit, before the limit, that marks the boundary of language and makes language possible.

Plato's Good suggests that at the root of any dyad, any dialectical pairing, be it subject/object, signifier/signified, male/female, there is an indeterminate dyad that is intolerable. In this place there is no determination, more importantly there is no possibility of determination. And we realise then that it is not so much determination as the possibility of determination that makes life bearable.

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