

LACAN AND THE *SOPHIST* – INDICATIONS OF THE LOGIC OF THE SUBJECT

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In the final weeks of the Seminar *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis* Lacan (1964-1965) makes an interesting suggestion.¹ It is that the logical conditions for the subsistence of the subject of the unconscious are indicated in Plato's *Sophist*. This paper looks at that text so that something of the logic of the subject may come to light. First of all let us consider the place in the Seminar where Lacan refers to the *Sophist*.

Lacan speaks about the subject and knowledge

Lacan has been developing the concept of what he terms "the subjective positions of being". In the seminar of 12 May 1965 he has been concerned with the question of the relation to knowledge that sustains the position of the analyst. To paraphrase: while analysis requires the analyst be the subject supposed to know, the fact of the Freudian unconscious means that this subject is something of a fiction constructed by the analysand and imposed upon the figure of the analyst. The analyst provides a certain availability in the order of the signifier which requires this fiction to function. The analyst thereby makes available the possibility of the generation of signifiers but also the coming to a place where signifying articulation fails.² The subject, therefore, has something to do with signifying articulation and with the place where that fails.

Referring to another knowledge relation, one that applies to the relation between the subject and the signifier, Lacan says that this notion of knowledge can be structured around the source of the expression *le mot me manque* (Lacan, 1964-1965: seminar of 12 May 1965, 2; 1987 [1953-

1. All references are to this text of the Seminar.

2. Lacan calls upon the Signorelli example of the forgetting of a proper name to remind us that Freud's forgetting was due to his coming up against a lack of a signifying articulation where death and sexuality were both involved.

1964]: 268, ff). In other words, this knowledge is structured around something missing. *Le mot me manque*, an expression which came into circulation in the time of Descartes, witnesses the truth in the Heideggerian sense: an unconcealing where something remains half-hidden.³ The short phrase *le mot me manque* announces the presence of something missing. And this indicates something of the relation of the subject to the signifier – the signifier represents the subject, or announces the presence of the subject, only in so far as the subject is not present.

Lacan is saying that knowledge has something to do with signifying articulation and that the nature of the relation between the subject and the signifier is a new kind of knowledge relation. What is this new kind of knowledge relation? The subject is there in so far as it lacks knowledge, that is, in so far as there is a lack of a signifier. And this is why it is called the subject of the unconscious, *das Unbewusste*, the not-known. If knowledge requires signifying articulation, the subject, set over against knowledge and signifying articulation, depends for its existence on the possibility of a missing signifier. This constitutes the new kind of knowledge relation which Freud discovered – a relation wherein something is missing.

The conditions for there to be a subject

Lacan goes on to ask what the conditions are for there to be a subject. The same conditions are necessary for the existence of the subject as for there to be a signifier oriented with respect to another signifier. The implication is that the conditions of the operation of signifiers with respect to each other are what enable the subject to be. Only very loosely can the subject be described as a signifier. More accurately Lacan's formulation tells us that it is the fact of the signifier being able to represent the subject for another signifier which allows the subject to come into being. The appearance of the subject is determined by the relation between two signifiers so that when a signifier is there and representing the subject for another signifier, the subject, in being represented, is not present.

3. This is truth as suggested by the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, which Heidegger explores in its origins and finds it to signify "to be hidden no longer, to be uncovered." (Heidegger, 1997: 11). Also since *lethe* has the sense of "forgetting", *aletheia* is an "unforgetting". In other words the truth coincides with anamnesis. And Freud makes this point in "A Child is Being Beaten": "...analytic work deserves to be recognised as genuine psychoanalysis only when it has succeeded in removing the amnesia which conceals from the adult his knowledge of his childhood from its beginning (that is, from about the second to the fifth year" (Freud, 1919e: 181).

What, then, are the conditions for the operation of signifiers? One is variation. A signifier has to be different from another signifier and it has to bear witness to this difference.⁴ A signifier only has a value with respect to other signifiers.

Another condition is that there be alternation, that there be appearance and disappearance "which would show us clearly that something is alternating, which is precisely the relationship of one of these signifiers with a subject" (Lacan, 1964-1965: seminar of 12 May 1965, 5).⁵ In other words, "... either the signifier represents or the subject and the signifier ... vanish[es] ...".⁶

Lacan's reference to Plato

While considering these conditions required for there to be a subject, Lacan refers to a dialogue of Plato which is at pains to establish that it is possible to speak of "what is not", or not-being. The reference to Plato's *Sophist* suggests that the description of the relations between not-being and being in that dialogue "overlaps" with the account of the relations required for there to be a subject (*Ibid.*: 6). In Plato's discussion not-being is established as "the setting-over-against each other of a part of the nature of the different and a part of that which is no less being than being itself".⁷ This status for not-being is established with difficulty. The wily arguments of the sophist along with the word of Parmenides, "father of the *logos*", prohibit any account of *what is not* on the basis that *what is not* is the opposite of *what is* and it is not possible to speak of that which is non-existent. Plato has his characters in the dialogue propose an account whereby *what is not* can be spoken of. Lacan implies that this achievement of the *Sophist*, this establishing of a logical status for not-being, coincides with the conditions necessary for there to be a subject. In other words, from a logical point of view, the status of this subject "overlaps" with that of not-being in the *Sophist*.

4. This agrees with Saussure's view that "in language there are only differences" (de Saussure, 1966: 120).

5. Lacan also speaks of alternation as oddity, exception, paradox.

6. Referring to the introduction to "The Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*" Lacan says that for there to be a subject there has to be the possibility of a message composed from a minimum of four terms arranged in accordance with a syntax: the four terms are given randomly but the fact of grouping them creates "a syntax from which already one cannot escape." It is a syntax of alternation and oddity for a "succession of signs" and this is the basic requirement for there to be a subject (Lacan, 1964-1965: seminar of 12 May 1965, 7).

7. In the references the page numbering of the Stephanus Edition of Plato is being used throughout. The Greek word for "setting over against" is *antithesis* (Plato, 1905: 258 bc).

The "Sophist"

The *Sophist* is ostensibly a discussion which attempts to define what it is that constitutes the sophist. The sophist is presented as an educator, a master of debate, who attracts students on the basis of a claim to be able to speak about everything and to be able to teach this ability. For the protagonists of Plato's dialogue, the Stranger from Elea and Theaetetus, this requires a claim to know everything. Their struggle to undermine this claim and "catch" the sophist occupies most of the text and leads them into a discussion of being and not-being. Why? Because the sophist argues that it is not possible to speak of that which is not. In other words, falsehood is not possible. Therefore, whatever the sophist says is the case; he cannot speak falsely, he cannot deceive. To counter this argument the Stranger and Theaetetus find it necessary to consider the status of *what is not* in order to establish the possibility of speaking of *what is not*, which is a condition for there being true speech and false speech.

The Stranger and Theaetetus reach a point in their discussion where being becomes as problematic a term as not-being. They have agreed that a discussion of being concerns the forms of being, rest and motion/change and the law which determines their combination and non-combination. This follows from their working definition of being: "I'm saying that a thing really is if it has any capacity at all, either by nature to do something to something else or to have even the smallest thing done to it even by the slightest thing, even if it happens only once" (Plato, 1905: 247 e). Being, then, is defined as the capacity to act or be acted upon. If being is to be known in any way it implies that it is acted upon and therefore it must change, or, move, in some way. In this way change, or motion, is implicated in being. Furthermore, it is decided that to speak of that which is, also requires the form of rest. This is related to the notion of something having to be identical to itself in order for it to be spoken of as something.

The Stranger and Theaetetus turn their attention to the conditions for combining things. They agree that the only acceptable account of combination is that some things combine and some things do not (*Ibid.*: 253 b-d). The implication is that the same law operates in regard to being, rest and motion as operates in the combinations of letters in words (*Ibid.*: 253 a ff). Since vowels run through all possible combinations of letters into words they are comparable to being in regard to the implication of *being* in everything that is.

The Stranger then proposes that they pay attention to the law of combination in so far as it applies to the three forms identified as the most important, namely being, rest and motion. That which is combines with both rest and motion but rest does not combine with motion. To these three they must add the relations of the same and the different. The same is a relation of each term to itself – it is the principle of identification. The different is a relation of each term to other terms; it would seem to require the principle of identification for its functioning. These two *extra* relations are perhaps not as additional as the discussion might suggest. Is not the state of being the same implied in the functioning of the form of rest and the relation of being different necessary for the operation of motion? Rest, then, involves the capacity to maintain identity while motion involves the capacity to move into relations with others, which are relations of difference.

Given the existence of these forms and their relations governed by the law of combination, what kind of negation is required so that, for example, motion can be itself and not be any of the other four and, at the same time, be? How can motion exist and at the same time be different from what is?⁸ What kind of "not" is required to be able to say that "change is both something which is not and also a thing that is since it partakes in that which is" (Plato, 1905: 256 d)?⁹ This *not* functions due, in part, to the operation of the different. Even *that which is* is not in that it is different from the other forms. Denial, saying something is not for example *it is not large*, does not necessarily indicate the contrary - in this example, *it is small*. Rather a denial is saying that something is other than that to which the words following the negation are applied (Plato, 1905: 257 bc). So, the negation of being is thus found to be implicated in being itself, in the sense of being other than, being different to. An example is given: what is different to the beautiful, the not-beautiful is "defined within one kind of the things that are and also set over against the things that are" (Plato, 1905: 257 de). Not-being, therefore, is found to be within being but also

8. The Stranger and Theaetetus use the term being with a strong existential sense. The sense of the Greek verb to be in this dialogue has been at the centre of much recent academic debate concerning the Sophist. A seminal paper in the debate is G.E.L. Owen (1986) which argues that the Sophist's discussion of being and not-being is not concerned with existence but with predication and reference. I do not think that the existential sense can be so easily excluded from the text or from the discussion of language, for that matter.

9. For the purposes of this paper the ontological status of the forms will not be questioned. It is taken to be linguistic: something is in so far as it is spoken, something rests in so far as it is spoken of as resting, etc. At 259 e the Stranger says that "the weaving together of forms is what makes speech possible for us." Our main concern here is with the logic of combination and the kind of negation it requires.

set over against being: "It seems that the setting-over-against each other of a part of the nature of the different and a part of that which is no less being than being itself, if it is lawful to say that; it does not signify something contrary to being but only something different" (Plato, 1905: 258 ab). Not-being has a place in the realm of being while having the singular status of being set over against being. This singular status is indicated in the dialogue by the fact that it is not counted as a sixth form necessary for the operation of combination. Where being is described as extensive, not-being is described as indefinite in relation to number (Plato, 1905: 256 e).¹⁰

The Stranger and Theaetetus agree that the conditions for combination which they have worked out are the basis of the possibility of saying anything: "Speech (logos) has come to be for us through the weaving together of forms each with each other" (Plato, 1905: 259 e). If the possibility of falsehood – saying what is not – can be established, the sophist will no longer get away with his claim that there is no validity to the opposition between true and false. The Stranger and Theaetetus go to work: without blending, without the law of combination there would be no speech; since speech is one of the things which is, it must mix with that which is not; through this mixing false belief and false speech are possible.

The relevance of the "Sophist" for an account of the Lacanian subject

The subject comes into being through the operation of negation in relation to a structure. In Plato's dialogue that structure consists of the five forms – being, rest, motion, same and different. In Plato's discussion it is seen that something else emerges in the combining and non-combining of these forms, something that is like a sixth form but is not to be counted as such, something necessary for the relations of same and different to function. This something is not-being. For the subject to come into being there must be a negation with respect to a structure, a negation that is not reducible to that determined by the relation of difference that has its place

10. The phrase in Greek is *apeiron plethei*. These are ambiguous words: *apeiron* has the sense of indefinite or limitless; *plethos* refers to number or quantity, but also to the masses. J. C. Milner (1966) emphasises the fact that not-being is not counted amongst the five forms in the paper that he developed out of his contribution to Lacan's Seminar on 2 June 1965. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the Stranger and Theaetetus miscount when counting up the number of definitions of the sophist that they have come up with in the first part of the dialogue: they have explicitly presented five accounts of the sophist but when they come to tot up their results they list six (Plato, 1905: 231 de). Not-being is not to be counted as a sixth form either.

within the structure. The subject's status, therefore, "overlaps" with that of not-being as it is presented in Plato's *Sophist*, in that the subject in coming to be is set over against the structure of being.

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Summary

Lacan and the "Sophist" – Indications of the Logic of the Subject

In the Seminar *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis* Lacan suggests that the logical conditions for the subsistence of the subject are indicated in Plato's *Sophist*. Lacan argues that the same conditions are necessary for there to be a signifier orientated with respect to another signifier as for there to be a subject. This amounts to saying that the subject is the effect of signifiers. This article sketches the conditions Lacan indicates as necessary for the operation of signifiers. This amounts to an account of the conditions for a logic. The article deals mostly with the implications of the discussion of being and not-being in Plato's *Sophist*. A new status for not-being is established in the face of arguments proposed by the sophist and seemingly supported by Parmenides. Before the *Sophist* being and not-being were thought as contraries. Not-being by this account is problematic and ultimately unspeakable. Therefore, Parmenides could prohibit research into not-being. Plato's dialogue situates not-being in the logical realm and suggests a relation between being and not-being which is marked by otherness and introduces a function of negation which allows what is not present to be presented. Lacan refers to the *Sophist* because something of the logical status of the subject, in so far as it is the effect of the operation of signifiers (in other words, the logic of the signifier), "overlaps" with the status of not-being established in Plato's text.

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Key words

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