

FROM IMPOSSIBILITY TO INABILITY: LACAN'S THEORY ON THE FOUR DISCOURSES¹

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During the late sixties and the early seventies, the intellectual talk of the town was about structuralism and the structuralists, with Foucault, Lacan and Barthes being the most prominent figures. The fact that each of these three denied being a structuralist was considered irrelevant, and added a bit of parisian spice and frivolity to the discussion.

As far as Lacan is concerned, I find it rather difficult to answer the question of whether he was a structuralist or not. In a discussion of that sort, everything depends on the definition one adheres to. Nevertheless, one thing is very clear to me: Freud was not a structuralist and, if Lacan is the only postfreudian who lifted psychoanalytic theory to another and higher level, then this *Aufhebung*, elevation in Hegel's sense, has everything to do with Lacanian structuralism and formalism. The rest of the postfreudians stayed behind Freud, even returning very often to the level of the prefreudians.

It is obvious that Freud was fundamentally innovative. He operated on his own a shift towards a new paradigm in the study of mankind. He was so fundamentally innovative that it would seem almost impossible to go any further. So, if we state that Lacan operates an *Aufhebung*, we have to explain what we mean by that. What is there to gain with Lacanian theory?

In order to appreciate the gain, we have to return to the fundamental difficulty in the psychological study of man. Within a classical scientific approach one has to start with observation and description in order to take the step towards categorisation and generalisation. This is the approach of prefreudian and postfreudian psychology and psychiatry, and it is an approach which is doomed to fail. The step from the observation of an individual to a generalised category proves to be a very frustrating business. Everyone who has been trained in psychodiagnostics, being the first step in this kind of scientific approach, knows exactly what I mean. By means of observation and interview with an individual patient, you sample a number of characteristics, which have to match the characteristics dictated by a psychiatric handbook. They have to match, but, of course, they never do. Still within the classical approach, the solution is always a variant on the same theme: one differentiates between primary and secondary characteristics; in that respect, you have for example the primary and the secondary characteristics of schizophrenia. The modern solution to the same problem is illustrated with the DSM, in which there remains an element of choice: a patient is called borderline if he shows at least five symptoms out of a list of eight, ect. There are multiple examples, but these are so boring that I won't go any further into them.

The more interesting part of it is the ever-returning field of tension between clinical reality on the one hand and conceptualisation on the other. Lacan has summarised this tension in one of his paradoxical statements: "Psychanalyse, c'est la science du particulier", that is: *Psychoanalysis is the science of the particular*. One of the reasons why Freud was so innovative lies in his solution to this problem. Instead of making his own categorial system in which every patient had to find his proper place and trying to convince the world that his system, and his alone, was the only

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useful one, he chose a completely different line of approach. Every patient is listened to, and every case-study results in a category into which one and only one patient fits. Already in his *Studies on Hysteria* he remarks that hysteria does not exist as a separate category, that in clinical reality we always find mixtures of different kinds of neuroses, whose pure form is only a matter of 'textbookpsychology'. The paradoxical result of this Freudian approach, focusing on the individual, even on the individual symptoms of one individual patient, is that Freud is the only one who succeeded in making a general theory on the human psyche. His method is not a secret one, on the contrary. In order to take the step from individual clinical reality to a general conceptualisation, Freud makes use of a ready-made theory, or at least almost ready-made. Indeed, the core of Freudian theory is based on classical myths and stories, with the Oedipus tragedy and the story of Narcissus being the most famous examples. In the last volume of the Standard Edition, we find ten pages filled with references to works of art and literature. Freud goes even further with his solution: where he did not find a suitable myth, he invented one himself, and that is of course the story of *Totem und Tabu*, the myth of the primal father.

This Freudian approach resulted in a major breakthrough, a new paradigm. Nevertheless, there are a couple of serious disadvantages to it. This method is useful only as long as one keeps the story sufficiently vague. From the moment one studies any individual myth in its own particularity, it will constitute part of that science of the particular. Oedipus himself had his own version of the Oedipus complex... Within the realm of cultural anthropology, Lévi-Strauss had the same problem, and that's why he considered each myth as a local variant of a hidden matrix. A second and even more important disadvantage has to do with the content of myths and the possibility that this content will be psychologized, which means that it becomes a substantial reality. That is what happened with Jungian and postjungian theory. Although we won't go any further into that, one Lacanian quotation suffices to announce the danger of such an approach. Abbreviated, it runs as follows: "If you authenticate the Imaginary, you will fill the waiting-room of madness".²

It is in light of this that we have to consider Lacanian theory as constituting a major breakthrough. Whereas Freud made the step from the individual patient to the underlying myths, Lacan will make the step from these myths to the formal structures which govern those myths. The most important Lacanian structure in this respect is, of course, the theory on the four discourses, and that is my main topic today.

The advantages of these formal structures are obvious. First of all, there is an enormous gain in level of abstraction. Just as in algebra, you can represent anything with those "*petites lettres*", the small letters, the **a** and the **S** and the **A**, and the relationships between them. It is precisely this level of abstraction which enables us to fit every particular subject into the main frame. Secondly, these formal structures are so stripped of flesh and bones that they diminish the possibility of psychologizing. For example, if one compares the Freudian primal father with the Lacanian Master signifier S_1 , the difference is very clear: with the first one, everybody sees an elderly greybeard before his or her eyes, roving between his females, etc. It is very difficult to imagine this greybeard using the S_1 ... which precisely open up the possibility of other interpretations of this very important function. This brings us to the third advantage: these structures permit us to steer the clinical practice in a very efficient way.

² J. Lacan. Le Séminaire Livre III. Les Psychoses, Paris, Seuil, 1981, p. 23:
"Authentifier ainsi tout ce qui dans le sujet est de l'ordre de l'imaginaire, c'est à proprement parler faire de l'analyse l'antichambre de la folie (...)"

Indeed it will make a great deal of difference, for example, whether one uses a master discourse or a hysterical discourse within a given situation; the respective formulae allow you to predict what the effect of your choice will be.

There is of course one disadvantage to this system. Compared to the Freudian solution, with the myths and the age-old stories, the Lacanian algebraic structures are boring, tedious even. Indeed, there is no flesh to them, since they are concerned only with the bare bones and, therefore, they completely lack the ever-present attraction of the Imaginary Order that is pre-eminent in those stories. That is the price one has to pay.

So much for our introduction, let us start now with our main subject: the theory of the four discourses. This theory is without any doubt the most important part of the Lacanian formalization. The discourses are the summary and – as far as I am concerned – the summit of the Lacanian theory.³ This implies, of course, that they are very dense and so, very difficult. At the same time, they are also very easy to understand and to handle, once one has grasped their inner logic. My aim for today is to give you a first view of this inner logic, together with an implementation of it. As far as this implementation is concerned, the ever-lurking danger is that one reduces each discourse to one concrete implementation, resulting in a return to the captivating imaginary scene. In the long run, the only answer to this captivation of the Imaginary lies in one's own analysis.

The Theory of the Discourses

We will start with a well-known fact: that the idea of communication has been the focus of attention in many different fields for the last twenty-five years, starting with 'human relations' and on to electronics and to genetics. There is one unifying aim which characterizes those different aspects of so-called communication theories: they want to bring communication up to a perfect standard, they want to eliminate any kind of "noise" so that the message can flow freely between sender and receiver. The basic myth governing those theories concerns the existence of the perfect communication, without any failure whatsoever.

Those theories are very different from the original concept of discourse, as it was coined by Michel Foucault in December 1970 during his inaugural speech at the Collège de France. For him, there is a very special relationship between power and discourse. The impact of a given discourse makes itself clear by imposing its signifiers on another discourse. For example, when, during the Gulf war, bombing was described as "surgical measures" carried out with "surgical precision", these metaphors are expressions of the power of the medical discourse, because they are used outside the proper field of their application. In this respect, the analysis of discourse is a very useful instrument within the framework of historical research on the evolution of power, which is precisely what Foucault wanted to do.

And now for something completely different. The Lacanian theory has nothing to do with either of those two. His theory is even in radical opposition to communication theory as such. Indeed, he starts from the assumption that

³ As we consider this theory to be a condensation of Lacan's evolution, every bibliographic reference to his work is too limited; that is why we will avoid giving concrete references in this paper. The theory itself was coined during the seminar of 1969-70, *L'Envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris, Seuil, 1991, pp.1 – 246), *Radiophonie* (Scilicet, 1970, nr.2/3, pp. 55-99) and the next seminar: *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*. A further elaboration can be found in *Encore*, the seminar of 1972-73.

communication is always a failure: moreover, **that it has to be a failure**, and that's the reason why we keep on talking. If we understood each other, we would all remain silent. Luckily enough, we don't understand each other, so we have to speak to one another. The discourses stretch a number of lines along which this impossibility of communication can take place. This brings us to the difference from Foucault's theory. In his discourse theory, Michel Foucault works with the concrete material of the signifier, which puts the accent on the **content** of a discourse. Lacan, on the contrary, works beyond the content and places the accent on the formal relationships that each discourse draws through the act of speaking. This implies that the Lacanian discourse theory has to be understood primarily as a **formal** system, i.e. independent of any spoken word as such. A discourse exists before any concretely spoken word; even more: a discourse will determine the concrete speech act. This effect of determination is the reflection of the Lacanian basic assumption, namely that each discourse delineates fundamental relationships, resulting in a particular **social bond**. As there are four discourses, there will be four different social bonds.

Before we go into that, we want to stress again the *a priori* emptiness of each discourse. They are nothing but empty bags with a particular form which will determine the content that one puts into them. The important thing to understand is that they can contain almost anything. The moment one reduces a given discourse to one interpretation, the whole theory implodes and one returns to the science of the particular.

Now, what does our discourse bag look like? Each bag has four different compartments into which one can put things. The compartments are called *positions*, the things are the *terms*. We start with the positions. There are four of them, standing in a fixed relationship to each other. The first position is very logical: each discourse starts with somebody talking, called by Lacan the *agent*. If one talks, one is talking to somebody, and that's the second position, called the *other*. Those two positions are of course nothing else but the conscious expression of each speech act, and in that sense you can find them in every communication theory:

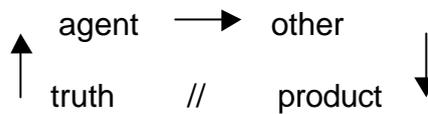
agent → other

Within this minimal relationship between speaker and receiver, between agent and other, one aims at a certain effect, that is, there is a purpose to it. The result of the discourse can be made visible in this effect, and that brings us to the next position, called the *product*.

agent → other
 ↓
 product

An example is when you tell your son to work hard at school and, as a result, he produces one failure after another. Up to this point, we are still within classical communication theory. It is only the fourth position which introduces the psychoanalytic perspective. As a matter of fact, it is not the fourth, but the first position, namely the position of the *truth*.

Indeed, Freud showed us that, while speaking, we are driven by a truth unknown to ourselves. It is this position of the truth which functions as motor and as starting-point of each discourse.



The position of the truth is the aristotelian Prime Mover, affecting the whole structure of the discourse. Its first consequence is that the agent is only apparently the agent. The ego does not speak, it is spoken. Of course you can come to this conclusion by looking at the process of free association, but even normal speaking yields the same result. Indeed, when I speak, I do not know what I am going to say, unless I have learned it by heart or am reading my speech from a paper. In all other cases, I do not speak but I am spoken, and this speech is driven by a desire, with or without my conscious agreement. This is a matter of simple observation, but it is fundamentally wounding to man's narcissism; that's why Freud called it the third great narcissistic humiliation of mankind.⁴ He coined it in a very clear statement: *"dass das Ich kein Herr sei in seinem eigenen Haus"*, "The I is not master in its own house". The Lacanian equivalent of this Freudian formula runs as follows: *"Le signifiant, c'est ce qui représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant"*. In this readjustment of the scales it is not the subject who stands to the fore in the definition: rather, all importance goes to the signifier. Lacan defines the subject as a passive effect of the signifying chain, certainly not the master of it. So, the agent of the discourse is only a fake agent, *"un semblant"*, a phoney. The real driving force lies underneath, at the position of the truth.

The second consequence of the introduction of this driving force is that the communicative sequence of the discourse is disrupted. One would expect an almost logical line according to which the agent translates the truth into a message directed to the other and resulting in a product which, in a feedback movement, returns to the sender. This is not the case. In Lacanian theory, there is no such thing as a truth which can be completely put into words: on the contrary, the exact nature of the truth is such that one can hardly put words to it. Lacan calls this characteristic *"le mi-dire de la vérité"*, the half-speaking of the truth. This is essentially a Freudian idea: the complete verbalisation of the truth is impossible, because primary repression keeps the original object definitively outside the realm of language, which means at the same time *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with as a consequence the endless compulsion to repeat, as a never-ending attempt to verbalise the non-verbal. The consequence of course is the endless insistence of this *"mi-dire de la vérité"*, which was beautifully expressed by Kierkegaard: "Repetition is a beloved wife which one never gets tired of." As a consequence, every discourse is an open-ended structure, in which the open-endedness functions as causal factor: because of the structural lack, the discourses keep on turning. If you have studied the famous eleventh seminar, you will recognise in this characteristic of the discourse the way in which he described in 1964 the Unconscious as a process of *"béance causale"*, a gap with a causal function, in a typical movement of opening and closing.

⁴ S. Freud. S.E.,XVI: 286; XVII: 136, 139-43;XIX:221.

truth of the matter with, as a consequence, the impossibility of realising one's desire at the place of the other ("my place or your place?"), resulting in the inability of the convergence between product and truth.

As I already said, these two disjunctions are the most difficult and the most dense part of the discourse theory. They condense a major Freudian discovery, namely the ever-present failure of the pleasure principle, and the consequences of that failure. This failure finds its expression in the disjunction of inability, whose consequence is impossibility. Man can never return to what Freud called "*die primäre Befriedigungserlebnis*"⁶, the primary experience of satisfaction. He is *unable to operate* this return because of the primary

S p a l t u n g, the division of the subject due to language. Nevertheless, he keeps on trying, and during this process he gets stuck on the road, and that's where he experiences the *impossibility*. Every biography can be read as a story about this impossibility. Now, instead of bemoaning the human condition, it's much more important to understand the crucial thing about this impossibility, namely that it is only the upper layer of an underlying inability, and **that the structure in its totality is a protective one**. If we were able to return to this primary experience of *jouissance*, the perfect symbiotic relationship would be realised, which would imply the end of our existence as a subject. That's why the psychotic subject, who does not share the discourse structure, has to find a private solution to this ever-present danger of disappearing in the great Other.⁷

A normally divided subject is protected against this danger. To put it bluntly: on the road to the bliss of all-embracing *jouissance* in which we would disappear, we get stuck at the point of orgasm, which means the end of it, and then we can start all over again. Some people are even so afraid that they don't even reach that point, and stop at an earlier roadblock.

In this sense, the four discourses are four different ways for the subject to take a stance towards the failure of the pleasure principle – that's the upper level, and four different ways to avoid the *jouissance* – that's the lower level. In that way, each of the four demonstrates a certain desire and the failure of it, resulting in a typical social bond. In order to understand this, we must now start with a study of the *terms*. The four positions and the two disjunctions always remain the same throughout the different discourses. The difference is situated in the terms, more particularly in the rotation of the terms over the positions. The terms themselves are very obvious, as they originate in the earlier Lacanian theory on the Unconscious and the structure of language. You need at least two signifiers in order to have a minimal linguistic structure, so we have already two terms: the S_1 and S_2 . The S_1 , being the first signifier, the Freudian "border signifier", "primary symbol", even "primary symptom" has a special status. It is the master-signifier, trying to fill up the lack, posing as the guarantee for the process of covering up that lack. The best and shortest example is the signifier "I" which gives us the illusion of an identity of our own. The S_2 is the denominator for the rest of the signifiers, the chain or network of signifiers. In that sense, it is also the denominator of "*le savoir*", the knowledge which is contained in that chain.

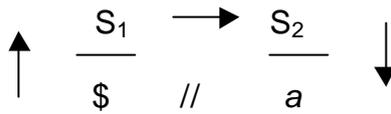
⁶ S. Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. S.E. I, pp.317-320. Of course this idea insists throughout the whole of Freud's work.

⁷ That is why the psychotic patient is uncanny to us: we do not share the same social bonds, because the psychotic does not share the discourses, due to his solution of the Oedipus complex – a solution that lies outside the discourse of the master, and hence, outside the very structure of discourse.

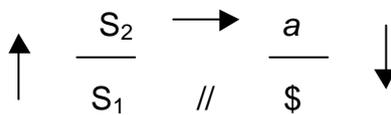
The next two terms are both an effect of the signifier. Indeed, once we have two signifiers, the necessary condition for the existence of a subject is fulfilled; remember: “a signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier”, “*Le signifiant, c’est ce qui représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant*”. So, the third term is the divided subject \$. The last of the terms, indeed, last but not least, is the lost object, notated as *object a*.

The result of language acquisition is a loss of a primary condition called ‘nature’; from the moment you speak, you become a subject of language (a divided subject for that matter), who tries to grasp an object beyond language, or, more accurately, a condition beyond the separation between subject and object. This object represents the final term of desire itself; as it lies beyond the realm of the signifier and thus beyond the pleasure principle, it is irrevocably lost. In that sense, it constitutes the motor which keeps us going for ever. For Lacan, it constitutes the basis of every form of causality for us, humans.

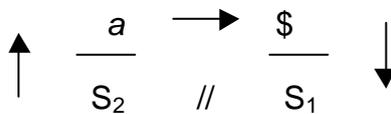
So we have four terms now: S_1 and S_2 , \$ and a , standing in a fixed order. These terms, with respect to the fixed order, can be rotated over the positions, resulting in four different forms of discourse. Indeed, with the fifth rotation, one returns to its starting point, due to the fixed order of the terms.



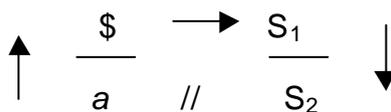
Discourse of the master



University discourse



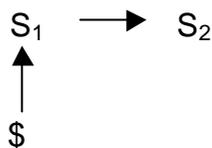
Analytic discourse



Hysteric's discourse

We start with the first discourse, that of the Master. It's the first one, because it founds the Symbolic Order as such, and it gives us a formal expression of the Oedipus complex and the constitution of the subject. It is the discourse in which terms and positions seem to match. The agent is the master-signifier, pretending to be one and undivided. As Lacan puts it: it's that particular signifier which gives me the idea that I am (master of) myself: "*maître/m'être à moi-même*". The desire of this discourse is indeed being one and undivided, that's why the master-signifier tries to join the S_2 at the place of the other: $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$

This desire is impossible: once there is a second signifier, the subject is necessarily divided between the two of them. That's why we find this divided subject at the position of the truth: the hidden truth of the master is that even he is divided.



In Freudian terms: the father is also submitted to the process of castration, the primal father is only a construct of the subject. The result of his impossible craving to be one and undivided through signifiers is a mere paradox: it ends in the ever-increasing production of object a , the lost object.



This *object a*, cause of desire, can never be brought into relation with the divided being of the $\$$. The effect is that the discourse of the master precludes the basic fantasy in its very structure: $\$ \diamond a$ is not possible, the master is *unable* to assume this relation. That's why he is structurally blind in this respect:

$\$ // a$

One of the most interesting things about this discourse is the relationship between master-signifier at the place of the agent and the S_2 at the place of the other. This implies that knowledge is also situated at the position of the other, which means that the other has to sustain the master in his illusion that he is at one with this knowledge. The pupils make the master or, in the Hegelian sense: it is the slave who confirms by his knowledge the position of the master.

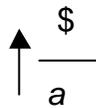
A classic example, since the study by Jean Clavreul concerns the medical discourse.⁸ A medical doctor functions as a master signifier, without any respect for his being divided as a subject; his dividedness is situated underneath, as part of a hidden truth. In functioning as master-signifier, he will reduce the patient to an object of his knowledge, and this shows in the terminology used, e.g. when referring to a patient as the "cardiac failure of room 16". The net result of the discourse is the lost object, which means that the master will never be able to assume the cause of his desire, as long as he stays in this discourse. If he wants to do that, he has to turn to another discourse, but from that moment he will no longer be able to function within

⁸ J. Clavreul. *L'ordre médical*. Paris, Seuil, 1978, pp. 1-284.

the previous one. For example, one of my patients is an oncologist who had to interrupt his career as an oncologist the moment he was confronted with his father as cancer patient. At that moment, he was overwhelmed by his own being as a divided subject, confronted with his ever-receding truth, and in his turn looking for a master signifier which would provide him with a satisfying answer. He had exchanged the master discourse for that of the hysteric and that's when he really started his analysis.

Indeed, when we turn the terms one quarter forwards, we obtain the hysterical discourse. At the place of the agent, we find the divided subject, which means that the desire of this discourse is desire itself, beyond any satisfaction. The social bond of this discourse is what Freud described as the hysterical identification with an unsatisfied desire. A typical example is, of course, the dream of the beautiful wife of the beautiful butcher, beautifully evoked by Maeve Nolan in her paper earlier. The Freudian theory about this identification is written down in *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Indeed, this phenomenon can give rise to a mass movement which is always mass hysteria.

In this way, hysteria as a social bond puts the impossibility of desire to the forefront. This discourse, being the logical sequence to the discourse of the oedipal Master, is at the same time the discourse of every normal neurotic. The moment one speaks, one has lost the primary object and becomes divided between the signifiers; the net result of that process is an ever-unstable identity and an ever-insisting desire, which can never be satisfied or destroyed, as Freud discovered at the end of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.



This desire, originating in the primary loss, has to express itself by way of a Demand, directed to the other. In terms of discourse, one has to turn the other into a master-signifier in order to get an answer. Hence, the hysterical subject makes a master out of the other, an S_1 who has to produce an answer: $\$ \rightarrow S_1$

When the hysterical students during the May revolt of 1968 interrupted the very seminar in which he was preparing the discourse theory, Lacan gave them a very cold answer: "*Vous voulez un maître, vous l'aurez*": "you are looking for a master, you will surely find one". It took them twenty years to understand... The questions put to the master are basically the same: "Tell me who I am, tell me what my desire is". Although this master can be found in different places - it could be a priest, a doctor, a scientist, an analyst, even a husband for that matter - they all have one thing in common: the master is supposed to know, they are supposed to know and to produce the answer. That's why we find S_2 , that is, knowledge, at the position of the product. Sadly enough, this answer will always be beside the point: the S_2 as general knowledge is *unable* to produce a particular answer about the particular driving force of the *object a* at the place of the truth: $a // S_2$. This inevitably results in a never-ending battle between hysterical subject and the master on duty. That's why revolutions always end with the installation of a new master, usually a bit more cruel

and more harsh than the previous one, and that's why every master sooner or later ends up with his head in a place where it is not supposed to be. Structurally, the hysterical discourse results in alienation for the hysterical subject and in castration for the master. The answer, given by the master, will always be beside the point, because the true answer concerns object *a*, the forever-lost object, which cannot be put into words. The classical reaction to this failure is to produce even more signifiers, which creates of course an ever-increasing distance from the lost object at the position of the truth. This in turn results in a confrontation between the master on the one hand and the fundamental lack in the signifying chain on the other, that is the impossibility of the signifying chain to verbalise the final truth. This impossibility causes the failure of the master, and so his symbolic castration. In the meantime, the master at the position of the other as S_1 has produced an ever-increasing S_2 and thus a knowledge. It is this knowledge which determines time and again the fundamental alienation for the hysterical subject: as an answer to her particular question, she receives a general theory, a religion, a...

Whether or not she complies to it, i.e. whether or not she identifies herself with it, is beside the point: in every case, the answer will be an alienating one. The knowledge as a product is *unable* to say anything important about the object *a* at the place of the truth: $a // S_2$. Throughout history we find grosso modo the following evolution:

a	S₁	S₂	\$
?	priest	religion	saint or witch
?	scientist	science	believer – cured sceptic – not cured
?	analyst	psychoanalytic knowledge	good hysteric bad hysteric ⁹

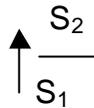
The bonus is the ever-increasing body of knowledge. If you look at the history of science, you will see that it is essentially a *hystory*: science has always been an attempt to answer the existential questions, and the only result of that attempt is science itself... This is all the more clear in human sciences where, for example, even psychoanalysis is a product of hysteria, but the same thing can be said of every development of knowledge, even on a strictly individual level. A developing subject wants to know the answers about his own dividedness: that's why he keeps on reading, speaking etc. He will end up with a considerable body of knowledge, but that doesn't teach him very much about his own lost object at the place of truth.

⁹ The expressions "good or bad hysteric" were naïvely coined by E. Zetzel in her paper: The so-called good hysteric, *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 1968, 49, 256-260.

The difference between the hysteric as a saint or a witch was not naïvely described by G. Wajeman, *Le maître et l'Hystérique*, Paris, Navarin/Seuil, 1982, pp. 1-287.

This knowledge takes the position of the agent in the university discourse. Indeed, if we turn the elements in the master discourse one quarter backwards over the four fixed positions, we obtain this university discourse, as a regression of the discourse of the master, and as the inverse of the hysterical discourse. The agent is the constituted knowledge, the other is reduced to being the mere object, cause of desire: $S_2 \rightarrow a$

The social bond results from the desire to reach this object through knowledge. This knowledge is presented as an accumulated, organised and transparent unity, it seems to work straightforwardly in the textbooks. The hidden truth, of course, is that it can only function if one has a guarantee for it, a master-signifier.



Every field of knowledge functions by the grace of such a guarantee: for example, in our field: “Lacan has said that...”, “Freud has said that...”. The primary example of this relationship between knowledge and mastersignifier is of course Descartes, who needed God to guarantee the correctness of his science.

At the position of the other, we find the lost object, cause of desire.

The relationship between this object and the signifying chain is structurally an impossible one: as the object is precisely that element, *Das Ding*, beyond the signifier, the signifying chain is the least appropriate agent for reaching for it. As a result, the product of this discourse is an ever-increased division of the subject: the more knowledge one uses to reach for the object, the more one becomes divided between signifiers, and the further one gets away from home, that is from the true cause of desire.

Moreover, there is in this discourse no relationship between the subject and the master-signifier; the master is supposed to secrete signifiers without there being any relationship with his own subjectivity: $S_1 // \$$

This implies of course one of the classical requirements of science: the so-called objectivity, which this discourse shows to be a mere illusion.

This brings us to the last discourse, that of the analyst, being the inverse of the discourse of the master. At the place of the agent, we find the object *a*, cause of desire. It is this lost object which founds the listening position of the analyst, which obliges the other to take his divided being into account, that’s why we find the divided subject at the position of other: $a \rightarrow \$$.

This relationship between agent and other is impossible, because it turns the analyst into the cause of desire of the other, eliminating him as a subject and reducing him to the mere residue, even the trash beyond the signifiers. That’s one of the reasons why Lacan stated that it is impossible to *be* an analyst, the only thing you can do is to function as such for somebody during a limited time. This impossible relationship from *a* to divided subject is of course the basis for the development of the transference, through which the subject will be able to encircle his object, which is one of the goals of an analysis. This is what Lacan calls “*la traversée du*

fantasma”, the journey through the basic phantasy. Normally – that is, following the discourse of the Master who sets the norm – normally this relationship is unconscious and makes up part of the inability disjunction: \$ // a. The analytical discourse, being the inverse of that of the master, brings this relationship to the forefront in an inverted form. From inability it goes to impossibility, but it’s an impossibility which can be explored in its effects: “*Ce qui ne cesse pas de ne pas s’écrire*”. The product of this discourse is the master signifier: in Freudian terms, the oedipal determinant particular for that subject. It is the function of the analyst to bring the subject to that point, albeit in a paradoxical way: the analytical position functions through a non-functioning as a subject and a being reduced to the position of object. That’s why the end result of the analytical discourse is radical difference: beyond the world of make believe, “*le monde du semblant*” in which we are all narcissistically alike, we are fundamentally different. The analytic discourse yields one subject, constructing and deconstructing itself throughout the process of analysis; the other party is nothing but a stepping-stone. It reminds me of several folk tales and fairy tales in which the beloved one, the object of desire, can no longer talk for one reason or another, so that the hero has to create a solution in which essentially he is confronted with his own being, unknown to him before.

The position of knowledge is remarkable in this discourse. One of the major turns in Freud’s theory and practice concerns precisely the way in which the analyst makes use of his knowledge.¹⁰ This way is indicated by the discourse of the analyst and it is a very paradoxical way. The knowledge functions at the position of the truth, but – as the place of the agent is taken by *object a* – this knowledge cannot be brought into the analysis. The analyst knows, oh yes, he does know, but he can’t do much with it, as long as he takes the analytical stance. That’s why this knowledge can be coined with the idea of *Docta Ignorantia*, i.e. “learned ignorance” as it was called by Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century; he has wisely learned not to know, and this opens up a way for the other to gain access to that which determined his or her subjectivity.

We are coming to our conclusion. I have tried to give you a description of the four different forms of discourses, four different social bonds, each time based on an impossible desire. Of course this brings to mind the Freudian formula about the three impossible professions: “*Edukieren, Regieren und Analysieren*”, to educate, that’s the university discourse, to govern, the master discourse, and to analyze, the analytic discourse, each giving rise to a particular brotherhood.¹¹ Freud forgot the most obvious one, the one which holds us together on a mass scale, namely to desire. What we did not describe are the interrelations between the four forms, and the way each discourse topples over into another. As this is material for another lengthy paper, suffice it to say that this interchangement has everything to do with the two disjunctions: the disjunction of impossibility of one discourse gives rise to the disjunction of inability in another, and so on.

In my introduction, I stressed the usefulness of this theory. Its formal character enables the theory to embrace many different particular instances. Nevertheless, in my experience, the greatest danger is that of reducing each discourse to one concrete implementation. The discourse of the hysteric, then, would be the way a

¹⁰ We have described this evolution in Freud as an evolution in discourses, starting with the hysterical discourse, over the discourse of the master to the analytical discourse: P. Verhaeghe, *Does the woman exist? From Freud’s Hysteric to Lacan’s Feminine*, Rebus Press – the Other Press, London – New York, 1999, revised second edition, pp. IX + 290.

¹¹ S. Freud. *Analysis terminable and interminable*. S.E. XXIII, p. 248.

neurotic person interrelates to someone else – very annoying; the discourse of the master would be synonymous with a kind of aristocratic narcissistic authority – always suspect; the discourse of the university would be the babbling of teachers – extremely annoying; and the discourse of the analyst would be the true and only one, leading to paradise – very expensive.

Besides the *epitheta ornantia*, these implementations are fundamentally wrong. The discourses, existing as a formal structure even before one speaks, are continually interchanging through the interrelationships between their disjunctions. The reduction to one implementation is *a fortiori* a reduction. Since the main topic today is hysteria, let's examine the hysterical subject. Of course he or she can come to the consulting room with a typical hysterical discourse, in which the other is forced to take the position of the master, with the obligation to secrete knowledge and end up castrated. On the other hand, this same hysterical subject herself can appear on the scene with the discourse of the master – and that is not such an unusual situation. In that case, the patient identifies him or herself with his or her symptom as master-signifier S_1 about which the other functions as a guarantee because he is supposed to possess the knowledge about it: "I have a postnatal depression, I *am* my postnatal depression, you are the specialist who knows (S_2) about such things, so just go ahead and cure me, do anything you want, as long as I don't have to enter the game as a subject". Third, the same hysterical subject can come to us with a university discourse. He or she can impress us with a considerable sum of knowledge by which he or she reduces the other to a mandatory silent object, and by which he or she avoids looking at the hidden master at the position of the truth.

Just as the reduction of hysteria to the hysterical discourse is wrong, the same goes for every discourse. As the truth can only be half said – "*le mi-dire de la vérité*" – the wheel keeps on turning. In the second chapter of his seminar *Encore*, Lacan tells us that, each time one changes one discourse for another, there is at that moment an emergence of the analytic discourse, as a possibility for grasping the determination from *object a* to $\$$. In the same paragraph he tells us that every crossing of discourse is also a sign of love. I want to leave you with that idea!