

Das Ding: Lacan and Levinas¹

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The Ethics of the Real

In Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–60), Lacan's thesis is that the ethical as such is articulated in relation to the order of the real, which is variously and obscurely glossed as "that which resists, the impossible, that which always comes back to the same place, the limit of all symbolization, etc. etc." Indeed this thesis is finessed in the following, crucial way: namely, that the ethical, which affirms itself in opposition to pleasure (hence Lacan's linking of the reality principle and the death drive, of Freud's very early and very late work, insofar as both are articulating what is opposed to or beyond the pleasure principle), is articulated in relation to the real insofar as the latter can be the guarantor of what Lacan calls, following a certain idiosyncratic and radical reading of Freud, *das Ding*, *la Chose*, the Thing.²

The whole thematic of *das Ding*, which, it would seem, only appears in Seminar VII (although what is named by *das Ding* might be said to be replaced later in Lacan's work in the guise of the "*objet petit a*"—the cause of desire in the subject), is somewhat tortuous, overdetermined as it is with suggestive but unspecific Heideggerian and Kantian allusions. Although Lacan places *das Ding* at the very centre of Freud's work, insofar as that work is, for him, governed by a founding ethical intuition, the central Freudian text that motivates Lacan's discussion of *das Ding* appears very briefly towards the end of the 1895 *Entwurf*

einer Psychologie, only published in 1950. As has often been remarked, the *Entwurf* is an uncannily prophetic piece of writing that anticipates the metapsychology of the First Topography elaborated in chapter 7 of the *Traumdeutung* and much of the Second Topography, particularly the economic analysis of the death drive in chapters 4 and 5 of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.³ I shall examine the relevant passage from the *Entwurf* below, but the remark that is picked up and developed by Lacan is that the figure of the *Nebenmensch*, the fellow human being, the neighbor, what I shall call below *le petit bonhomme*, appears to the subject "als Ding."⁴ Such is what Freud suggestively calls "*der Komplex des Nebenmenschen*," the complex of the fellow human being.

Of course, and here I come back to a theme I have developed in a discussion of Levinas and Freud,⁵ it is because the ethical moment in Lacan articulates itself in relation to the real that it is *traumatic*. Contact with the real leaves the subject with the affect of trauma, and we might say with Kristeva that, "Le traumatisme met à jour le rapport de sujet à la chose [traumatism illuminates the relation of the subject to the thing]."⁶ Furthermore, what is particularly suggestive from a Levinasian point of view is that the cause of trauma in the subject is the figure of the neighbor, the fellow human being, namely, that being with whom I am in an ethical relation.

Das Ding and the Face of the Other

Let me try and clarify my initial claim anecdotally: I remember a friend saying to me several years ago, "What prevents the face of the other in Levinas from being *das Ding*?" I did not know quite what he meant at the time, but the question was clearly meant critically. I would like to answer the question directly now by saying that *nothing* prevents the face of the other being *das Ding*, and furthermore that there is a *common formal structure to ethical experience in Levinas and Lacan*. To use Dieter Henrich's expression, what Levinas and Lacan share is a common concept of moral insight, a shared pathology of the moral, although the tone, form, method, sources, and normative consequences of this pathology are starkly different.⁷

In my discussion of Levinas and Freud, my aim was to borrow elements from Freudian psychoanalysis in order to delineate, criticize, and complicate the structure of the subject that is at the basis of ethical experience in Levinas. What I would like to propose here is an extension of that argument that brings together the Levinasian conception of the subject with Lacan's account of ethical experience and attempts some kind of *rapprochement*. On the one hand, I am using

psychoanalytical categories to both challenge, clarify, and hopefully deepen what is going on in Levinas' work. However, on the other hand, it should be noted that this proposal also runs in the opposite direction: namely, that the analysis of the subject as trauma in Levinas does not lead into some supposed psychoanalytic an-ethicality, but rather opens up the possibility of emphasizing *the ethical dimension to psychoanalytic experience*, what Lacan sees as the revolutionary ethical intuition at the basis of Freud's work, namely, that Freud's Copernican Revolution, like that of Kant, although in a rather different way, also subscribes to the primacy of practical reason.

However, such statements and such an attempted rapprochement, although tempting, might be said to obscure the substantive differences between Levinas and Lacan. For example, their estimations of the validity of psychoanalysis obviously stand in stark contrast, as do their evaluations of Heidegger. However, their main philosophical difference might be said to concern the relation to Hegel, a certain Kojévian Hegel, specifically the dialectic of intersubjectivity at the core of the Lacanian understanding of the subject, the symbolic order, and the concept of the transference. As has been argued by Peter Dews, the Lacanian claim that the truth of the subject takes place in "the locus of the Big Other" is arguably the psychoanalytic restatement of Hegel's thesis that subjectivity is constituted through an intersubjective dialectic, a dialectic graphically represented in Schema L.⁸ There can be no doubt that it is precisely this dialectical model of intersubjectivity that is refused from the beginning to the end of *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas defies Hegel and the principle of noncontradiction by describing an absolute relation or *un rapport sans rapport*, that is to say, a *nondialectical model of intersubjectivity*.

However, the constructing of this simple opposition between Levinas and Lacan on the basis of their relative debt to Hegel and the understanding of the symbolic order as the intersubjective field of community has to be complicated with reference to Seminar VII, where the order of the Real is introduced as the limit of symbolization, and where the ethical moment in psychoanalysis is articulated in the "relationless relation" to *das Ding*. As Lacan says, "I am concerned with the ethics of psychoanalysis, and I cannot at the same time discuss Hegelian ethics. But I do want to point out that they are not the same" (*LEP*, 126/*EP*, 105). To this one might add that, in Seminar VII, Lacan explicitly seeks to distance his dialectic of desire from any Hegelianism (*LEP*, 160/*EP*, 134), and furthermore—and the importance of this remark will become increasingly apparent—"Hegel nowhere appears to me to weaker than he is in the sphere of poetics, and this is especially true of what he has to say about *Antigone*" (*LEP*, 292/*EP*, 249).

*Ethics and Aesthetics—the Problem of Sublimation,
the Need for Tragedy*

Of course, such an attempted rapprochement with Levinas raises interesting but unanswerable questions about the coherence and development of Lacan's teaching and about the place of Seminar VII within that teaching. In its extensive use of Melanie Klein's work in relation to the body of the mother "*als Ding*," Seminar VII can be seen to be articulating and anticipating Lacan's later developments on feminine sexuality in *Encore* (Seminar XX, 1972–73).⁹ Also, along with the discussion of Joyce in the as yet unpublished *Le Sinthôme* seminar (Seminar XXIII, 1975–76), Seminar VII contains Lacan's most sustained discussion of aesthetics in his extended analysis of the *Antigone*, the literature of courtly love, and the phenomenon of anamorphosis in art. But why is it that when Lacan discusses ethics, he also gives one of his most sustained discussions of aesthetics?

Obviously, the question of the relation of ethics to aesthetics raises the problem of sublimation, which is an absolutely essential topic of Seminar VII. Let me try and briefly broach this topic by summarizing what Lacan says at the beginning of the final séance of the seminar. What is *demanded* in analysis is happiness, nothing less. However, in the time since Aristotle—what Lacan variously and gnominically calls "the crisis of ethics", which implies a rather encoded but detectable *genealogy of ethics*; i.e., in Hegelian terms, the crisis of ethics is the disappearance of the world of *Sittlichkeit*, a crisis in the position of the master revealed *inter alia* in Hegel's master/slave dialectic—the question of happiness is not amenable to an Aristotelian solution; it has become what Lacan calls a political matter, a matter for everyone, "there is no satisfaction apart from the satisfaction of all." That is to say, happiness is no longer referable to the position of the master or subsumable under the ideal of contemplation, as it was for Aristotle, but rather is referred to an abstract quantitative generality. Happiness becomes that of the greatest number. Of course, what Lacan is describing here is the Benthamite world of utilitarianism, which is surprisingly generously treated in Seminar VII, mainly through a reading of Bentham's *Theory of Fictions*, where Lacan picks up on the idea that fiction is not deception but is the structure of a truth, where he claims that Bentham approaches the question of ethics "at the level of the signifier" (*LEP*, 269/*EP*, 228).¹⁰

However, despite this concession to Bentham, it is clear that within utilitarianism happiness becomes the object of a moral calculus; it is a question of the happiness of the greatest number. In this utilitarian context—and this is the context for Freud, as is clear from his early

translations of John Stuart Mill—the *only possibility of happiness offered by psychoanalysis is through sublimation*, formulaically defined by Freud as satisfaction without repression. Sublimation is the satisfaction of a drive insofar as the drive is, through the work of sublimation, deflected from its aim (*Ziel*). For example, the sexual drive can be deflected from its aim through religious sublimation, as is evidenced in the ecstasies of female mystics discussed by Lacan in the *Encore* seminar. In Lacanian terms, sublimation is the realization of one's desire, where one realizes that one's desire will not be realized, where one realizes the lack of being that one is. So, in the absence of the possibility of happiness, that is, in the awareness of the *tragic* dimension of human experience (a tragedy confronted on the couch in the form of symptoms), only sublimation can save us.

Thus, Lacan dismisses the conventional idea of the moral goal of psychoanalysis, namely, that it might be able to achieve some kind of psychological normalization, i.e., that the subject might be able to re-adjust to reality by achieving a new harmonization of drive and object. Such an idea of the ethics of psychoanalysis is nothing less than “a kind of fraud [*une sorte d'escroquerie*]”; “[t]o make oneself the guarantor that the subject might in any way be able to find its good itself (*son bien même*) in analysis is a kind of fraud” (LEP, 350/EP, 303). Within the conventional moralization of psychoanalysis, the success of analysis is reduced to providing individual comfort, or what Lacan refer to as “the service of goods.” With a delightfully restrained sarcasm, he quips,

There is absolutely no reason why we should make ourselves the guarantors of the bourgeois dream. A little more rigour and firmness is demanded in our confrontation with the human condition. (LEP, 350/EP, 303)

Thus, the moral goal of psychoanalysis does not consist in putting the subject in relation to the Sovereign Good, not only because s/he does not possess this Good, but also because s/he knows “that there isn't any [*mais il sait qu'il n'y en a pas*]” (LEP, 347/EP, 300). Lacan adds in relation to the moot point of the end of analysis,

To have carried through an analysis to its end is nothing other than to have encountered that limit where the entire problematic of desire is posed. (LEP, 347/EP, 300).

Rather, the moral goal of psychoanalysis consists in putting the subject in a relation to its desire, of confronting the lack of being that one is, which is always bound up with the relation to *death*. Such is what Lacan calls, with surprising forthrightness, “the reality of the human condition [*la réalité de la condition humaine*]” (LEP, 351/EP, 303). In

relation to the death-bound reality of desire, all the analyst can offer is not comfort but “an experienced desire” (*LEP*, 348/*EP*, 301). This is the reason why, at the end of Seminar VII, Lacan writes that from a psychoanalytical point of view, “the only thing of which one can be guilty is giving way on one’s desire” (*LEP*, 370/*EP*, 321). Such is the categorical imperative of Freud’s Copernican Revolution—do not give way on your desire.

Thus, the problem of sublimation is pursued in relation to death, to the death drive as the fundamental aim or tendency of human life. The question is: *how can the human being have access to the death drive?* How can one grasp the meaning of human finitude or “the reality of the human condition”? In Lacanian terms, it is only by virtue of the signifier, that is to say, through aesthetic form and the production of beauty. Thus, the function of the beautiful, of sublimation as the formation of the beautiful, is to reveal the human being’s relation to death. But “reveal” is perhaps too strong a verb here, for it is not that the aesthetic, in the form of beautiful sublimation, reveals, manifests, or places the subject in a relation of adequation with the truth of finitude. It is rather that *the aesthetic intimates the excess of the ethical over the aesthetic*. In other terms, the real (as the realm of the ethical) exceeds the symbolic (the realm of the aesthetic), but the latter provides the only access to the former. Thus, access to the real or the ethical is only achieved through a form of symbolic sublimation that traces the excess within symbolization. There is no direct access to the real, only an oblique passage.

Hence, the importance of the figure of Antigone and the experience of the tragic in Seminar VII. Antigone, as the figure par excellence for the beautiful, embodies this excess of the ethical over the aesthetic. The effect of her beauty, or what Lacan refers to as her “splendor”, is to trace the sublime movement of the ethical within the aesthetic. The key term in Lacan’s extraordinary reading of *Antigone* is *ἄτη*, which he renders as “transgression”.¹¹ Thus, the function of art is transgression, the transgression *of the aesthetic through the aesthetic*. Namely, that Antigone transgresses the laws of Creon, refuses to feel any guilt for her transgression and, in so doing, does not give way on her desire, which is to say, she does not give way on “the laws of heaven”. As Lacan remarks in the penultimate paragraph of Seminar VII, in allusive defiance of Hegel’s interpretation of the *Antigone*, “The laws of heaven in question are the laws of desire” (*LEP*, 375/*EP*, 325).

The law of desire is death, and Antigone goes all the way unto death because she will not give way on her desire. Thus, the work of the beautiful—of Antigone *as the beautiful*—takes the human being to the

limit of a desire that cannot itself be represented; the work of sublimation traces the outline of something truly sublime; the aesthetic object describes the contour of *das Ding* at the heart of ethical experience; the shadow of *das Ding* falls across the aesthetic object. This is why, earlier in Seminar VII, Lacan says, "Thus, the most general formula that I can give you of sublimation is the following: it raises the object . . . to the dignity of the Thing [*Elle élève un objet . . . à la dignité de la Chose*]" (LEP, 133/EP, 112).

Sublimation produces a kind of aesthetic screen, a redemptive *Schein* or protective *Schleier*—which allows the profile of *das Ding* to be projected while not being adequate to its representation. The aesthetic—in this case the work of tragedy—is the ever-inadequate symbolization of that Thing that resists symbolization. This inadequate symbolization both allows the subject contact with the real that leaves the affect of trauma in the psyche, and protects the subject from the direct glare of *das Ding*. We need art, in Nietzsche's words, lest we might perish from the truth. The aesthetic is a veil that permits an unveiling, *une voile* which allows *un dévoilement*, recalling the double structure of truth as *aletheia* in Heidegger, as the bivalence of concealment and unconcealment. The question that I shall pursue elsewhere is whether comedy, rather than tragedy, is a form of sublimation that better describes the relation of the subject to *das Ding*.¹²

Sublimation in Levinas?

An interesting and open question that is raised here, in passing, by the problem of sublimation is the following: namely, given Levinas' refusal of the categories of psychoanalysis, what might be *imagined* as the place of sublimation in his work? Furthermore, and more importantly, is there not a need for sublimation in Levinasian ethics? What I mean is that, as some critics have pointed out, there is an undoubted ethical extremism in Levinas that, in my presentation of his work, centers around the theme of the subject as trauma. That is, Levinas seems to be describing ethical responsibility as the maintenance of a permanent state of trauma. Now, I think this raises a twofold question: first, what is our access to this state of trauma in Levinas? And second, is (or should) this state of trauma (be) sustainable?

Obviously, our access to this state of trauma, as Levinas describes it, occurs through Levinas' *writing*, through his ethical language that "describes the paradox in which phenomenology suddenly finds itself."

Levinas' writing is an excessive and interrupted phenomenology, an aesthetic presentation that breaches the aesthetic and breaks with the order of presentation and presence.¹³ The entire effort of Levinas' strangely hyperbolic rhetoric is to intimate or testify to a dimension of the unthematizable Saying within the thematics of the Said that, for him, characterizes philosophical discourse. That is, Levinas attempts to use the Said of philosophy against itself by letting the Saying resound within it. Levinas' books—and this is something that becomes increasingly explicit in his later writings—might be seen as an attempt at sublimation that keeps open the traumatic dimension of the sublime, allowing the Saying to circulate within the Said that both betrays and conveys it. There is no pure Saying, there is nothing prior to the mediation of the Said. Levinas' writing might be seen as an anti-aesthetic aesthetic.¹⁴

A further thought in relation to sublimation in Levinas would focus on the whole question of *philosophy* understood as "the wisdom of love". The first four chapters of *Otherwise than Being* follow the itinerary of a phenomenological reduction from intentionality, through sensibility and proximity, to the subject of substitution conceived in terms of trauma. But in chapter 5 of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas shows the necessity for the passage from the Saying to the Said, not the pure Said of war and injustice that precedes the reduction, but what might be called *the justified Said*, the Said that is justified through being derived from a prior Saying. It is in this context that Levinas discusses the third party, justice, ontology, politics, and consciousness, and where he inverts the usual definition of philosophy from "the love of wisdom" to "the wisdom of love". "Love" is here employed as a synonym for the ethical, and "wisdom" is the discursive-theoretical articulation of the ethical in a discourse that aspires to justice. Philosophy is the wisdom of love "at the service of love".¹⁵ Twisting the intention of Levinas' words, might one not say that philosophy itself—as the work of love in the name of justice—is the Levinasian discourse of sublimation? In Kleinian register, might one not wonder whether the radical *separation* of trauma that defines the ethical subject requires *reparation* in a work of love? What this in mind, might one not imagine the rhythm of Levinas' discourse as a movement between separation and reparation, between the tear and repair, between the traumatic wound and the healing sublimation, between the subject and consciousness, between ethics and ontology?¹⁶ In this sense, Levinasian ethics would not simply be a street from the Same to the Other, but would also, in a second sense, consist in a return to the Same, but a Same that had been itself.

Ethical Subjectivity in Lacan and Levinas

But let me now turn more directly to the glare of *das Ding* and try to make good some of the claims made above. Just after the initial discussion of *das Ding* in Seminar VII, Lacan imagines the following curious scenario. I quote at length:

What if we brought a simple soul into this lecture hall, set him down in the front row and asked him what Lacan means.

The simple soul will get up, go to the board and will give the following explanation: "Since the beginning of the academic year Lacan has been talking to us about *das Ding* in the following terms. He situates it at the heart of a subjective world which is the one whose economy he has been describing to us from a Freudian perspective for years. This subjective world is defined by the fact that the signifier in man is already installed at the level of the unconscious, and that it combines its points of reference with the means of orientation that his functioning as a natural organism of a living being also gives him."

Simply by writing it on the board and putting *das Ding* at the centre, with the subjective world of the unconscious organized around in a series of signifying relations around it, you can see the difficulty of topographical representation. The reason is that *das Ding* is at the centre only in the sense that it is excluded. That is to say, in reality *das Ding* has to be posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget—the Other whose primacy of position Freud affirms in the sense of something *entfremdet*, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me, something that on the level of the unconscious only a representation can represent. (LEP, 87/EP, 71)

My organizing claim here is that the structure of the Lacanian ethical subject organized around *das Ding*—as the prehistoric other that it is impossible to forget, as something strange, or *entremdet*, that is at the heart of me (*étranger à moi tout en étant au coeur de ce moi*)—has the same structure as the Levinasian ethical subject that I sought to elucidate with the concept of trauma and that Levinas tries to capture with various formulae, such as "the other in the same". On this construal of their work, I think one can establish a formal or structural homology between ethical subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan. As stated above, they share a common grammar of moral insight.

Of course, the consequences of such a homology between Lacan and Levinas at the level of the concrete determination of the Good or in providing prescriptions or procedures for action are far from being identical and such is not my claim. To pursue this homology that far would raise related and vexed questions that cut in two directions at

once. For example, in relation to Lacan: what is the *scope* of his teaching; i.e., is this only an ethics *of* psychoanalysis, *for* psychoanalysts or is this the basis for a more general ethics? And in relation to Levinas: how exactly does the establishment of ethics as first philosophy in Levinas relate to specific and—as he calls them—prephilosophical determinations of action at the level of social life?¹⁷ And perhaps what most clearly differentiates Lacan and Levinas is what they initially seem to have in common, namely, the attempt to think ethics in relation to desire. It is, at the very least, questionable whether one can identify Levinas' rather Platonic conception of metaphysical desire with a Freudian ethics based on the unconscious sexual desire of the libidinal body. It seems to me that one must not confuse physical and metaphysical *eros*, or seek to reduce one to the other.

However, to return to my main argument for a structural or formal homology between Lacanian and Levianian ethics, which I will presently attempt to pursue through an analysis of the figure of the *Nebenmensch* in Freud, it is fortunate (or unfortunate, depending on how one looks at it) to note that my argument has already been anticipated in an interesting essay by Monique Schneider, "La proximité chez Levinas et le *Nebenmensch* freudien."¹⁸ The whole article is written without any reference to Lacan, which is slightly bizarre, but what is useful to me about this essay is that the link between Lacan and Levinas can be made stronger by showing how Schneider establishes an independent link from Freud to Levinas.

The basic thesis of this essay (and Schneider tends to repeat this basic point a little too insistently) concerns an interpretation of Freud; namely, that in Freud's *Entwurf*, specifically in the brief discussion of the *Nebenmensch*, there is both a recognition of the essential intrication, "*l'enchevêtrement inextricable*" (CH, 434), of the Same and the Other, and the evaluation of this intrication by Freud as a threat, as something to be excluded "in order to come back to a subject seen as a separated being." Thus, Schneider's claim is that after the small breakthrough of the *Entwurf* in 1895, the entire subsequent Freudian enterprise is concerned with trying to erect a barrier between the same and the other and establishing a strict subject/object dualism. Although such a claim is doubtless justified insofar as Freud's work is often informed by rather traditional epistemological assumptions, one would, against Schneider, have to acknowledge that the question of subject/object dualism in Freud becomes much more richly entangled after the introduction of the concept of narcissism in 1914, with the splitting of the ego and the introduction of the agency of conscience or the super-ego in the second Freudian topography.

From the Levinasian perspective that Schneider adopts, Freud falls from an original ethicality into a traditional ontology. Thus, the whole analysis of the subject as substitution, where self and other are essentially intricately, is employed as a key for understanding the fate of ethics in Freudian theory: "Levinas's text can thus be received as untangling what is strangled in the Freudian itinerary, a strangling that puts an end to the first attempt at an opening" (CH, 436). And again, "Levinas is thus placed as the *Nebenmensch* of the Freudian text."

"If it Screams"—the Nebenmensch Complex in Freud

But what or who is this figure of the *Nebenmensch*? The key passage in Freud, which is at the center of Lacan's Ethics seminar and again at the center of Schneider's and Kristeva's contestations of a Lacanian approach (see note 20), is the following. Allow me to quote Freud's German and then paraphrase:

Nehmen wir an, das Objekt, welches [die] W[ahrnehmung] liefert, sei dem Subjekt, ähnlich, ein *Nebenmensch*. Das theoretische Interesse erklärt sich dann auch dadurch, dass ein *solches* Objekt gleichzeitig das erste Befriedigungsobjekt, im fernerer das erste feindliche Objekt ist, wie die einzige helfende Macht. Am Nebenmenschen lernt darum der Mensch erkennen. Dann werden die Wahrnehmungskomplexe, die von diesem Nebenmenschen ausgehen, zum Teil neu und unvergleichbar sein, sein *Züge*, etwa auf visuellem Gebiet, andere visuelle W[ahrnehmungen], z.B. die seine Handbewegungen, aber werden im Subjekt über die Er[innerung] eigener, ganz ähnlicher visueller Eindrücke vom eigenen Körper fallen, mit denen die Er[innerungen] von selbst erlebten Bewegungen in Assoziation stehen. Noch andere Wahrnehmungen des Objekts, z.B. wenn es schreit, wenn die Erinnerung, an eigenes Schreien und damit an eigene Schmerzerlebnisse wecken. Und so sondert sich der Komplex der Nebenmenschen in zwei Bestandteile, von denen der eine durch konstantes Gefüge imponiert, als *Ding* beisammenbleibt, während der andere durch Erinnerungsarbeit *verstanden*, d.h. auf eine Nachricht vom eigenen Körper zurückgeführt werden kann. Diese Zerlegung eines Wahrnehmung-komplexes heisst ihn *erkennen*, enthält ein Urteil und findet mit dem letzten erreichten Ziel ein Ende.¹⁹

Thus, the fellow human being is the object of both love and hate: s/he is *both* the first satisfying object *and* the first hostile object, both the "helpful power" of the friend, and the enemy (*feindliche Objekt*). Note the logic of Freud's text here, where the *Nebenmensch* is simultaneously (*gleichzeitig*) predicated with opposing attributes: s/he is both incomparable (*unvergleichbar*), which is another word Levinas uses to describe

the relation to the other, and comparable. S/he both is capable of being understood by the subject, and escapes understanding. And in this way, the *Nebenmensch* complex falls apart into two components: *on the one hand*, the other stands over against me as a thing—als *Ding*—or imposes itself through what Freud mysteriously calls “*konstantes Gefüge*,” which Lacan translates as “*un appareil constant*,” an unchanging apparatus, which threatens to turn the other als *Ding* into some sort of machine. *On the other hand*, the other can be understood or comprehended on the basis of its being similar to me, Freud’s twice-repeated word is *ähnlich*. The other is both my semblable and a stranger to me, what Lacan called above “something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me,” what Levinas would describe as “the other within the same.” It can thus be seen how the relation to *das Ding* corresponds to the logic of substitution.

Freud concludes the passage by claiming that the *Nebenmensch* complex is resolved or attains its aim or end when cognition (*erkennen*) reduces the other to the same through the activity of judgement. For Freud, the work of judgment, like the structure of the unconscious *Wunsch* in the *Traumdeutung*, reduces alterity by attempting to bring about a *state of identity*. It is tempting to give a rather Kantian interpretation of this last sentence in the above quote, where the unconscious traumatic affect of the relation to *das Ding* is resolved through the move to judgment as the subject’s conscious act of synthesis, where the subject lays hold of or takes possession of the alterity of the manifold of intuition by placing it under a concept. Although it must be noted that for Kant, like Lacan and Levinas, what is left over as the inassimable remainder of *das Ding* continually escapes the cognitive power of the subject, whether the *Ding an sich* of the transcendent object X in the first *Critique*, the relationless relation to the incomprehensibility of the moral law in the second *Critique* or the relation of the subject to the sublime in the third *Critique*. However, the function of judgment in the above passage from Freud has the function of resolving the *Nebenmensch* complex and restoring the subject/object dualism at the basis of the traditional predicament of philosophy.

But we have overlooked a crucial moment in Freud’s text, a moment at the center of Schneider’s essay, namely, that the relation to the *Nebenmensch* announces itself “*wenn es schreit*,” if it screams, shouts, cries, or screeches. The fellow human being is perceived als *Ding* when it screams, that is, the other presents itself in a prelinguistic scream that traumatically recalls the subject’s own screaming and its own memory of experience of pain (*an eigenes Schreien und damit an eigenes Schmerzerlebnisse*). The other, which resists my attempts at comprehension,

is presented to me in a scream that recalls me to the memory of my own screaming, my own trauma, my own “prehistoric” experience of pain, an archaic memory laid down in relation to my first satisfying/hostile object. The *Nebenmensch als Ding* initiates a traumatic relation to the other that recalls me to my traumatic self-relation, to my wounded subjectivity. In relation to the two moments of the *Nebenmensch* complex, the scream both presents me with the other *als Ding* in a prelinguistic affect, and allows me to understand the other insofar as the other’s screaming recalls me to my own memory of my own painful affect. The important point here is that ethical subjectivity is constituted in the traumatic memory of wounding.

This structure of the scream gives us the pattern of substitution in Levinas, where the scream would be the dimension of Saying that would elucidate the prehistory of the subject in its essential intrication with alterity. As with Rousseau’s discussion of *la pitié* in the Second Discourse, the prelinguistic “*aidez-moi!*”, the scream or cry of the other gives the subject both its first opening towards alterity and places it radically in question.²⁰ The affective, prelinguistic call of the other is in Levinasian terms the “an-archic origin” of goodness, a “natural” goodness that disappears within Rousseau’s genealogy of morals in the Second Discourse.

Thing Becomes Word—Lacan on Das Ding

With the above discussion in mind, let me now turn to Lacan’s commentary on the figure of the *Nebenmensch* and its relation to *das Ding*, which is scattered here and there in the first section of Seminar VII. In a response to a presentation by Pontalis on Freud’s *Entwurf*, Lacan makes the extraordinary claim:

it is through the intermediary of the *Nebenmensch* as speaking subject that everything that has to do with the thought processes is able to take shape in the subjectivity of the subject. (*LEP*, 50/*EP*, 39)

I will come back to the question of whether the *Nebenmensch* is a speaking subject below, but the central discussion of *das Ding* comes slightly later, and one might note the Levinasian resonances in Lacan’s description of the relation to others as “beside yet alike, separation and identity”:

On that basis there enters into play what we will see function as the first apprehension of reality by the subject. And it is at this point that reality intervenes, which has the most intimate relationship to the subject—the *Nebenmensch*. A formula that is altogether striking in as much as it expresses powerfully the idea of beside yet alike,

separation and identity [*l'à-côté et la similitude, la séparation et l'identité*].

I ought to read you the whole passage but I will limit myself to the climactic sentence, "Thus the complex of the *Nebenmensch* is separated into two parts, one of which affirms itself through an unchanging apparatus [*un appareil constant*], which remains together as a thing, *als Ding*". (LEP, 64/EP, 51)

Thus, the subject's first apprehension of reality, of the order of the real, occurs in the relation to the *Nebenmensch als Ding*, that is, as alien, absolutely other and "*Fremde*" (LEP, 65/EP, 52). As Lacan goes on to remark, also playing with the etymology of *Ur-teil*, there is an "original division" in the experience of the other, where the subject "finds itself in the beginning led toward a first outside." But Lacan makes the claim even stronger, arguing that "*tout le cheminement du sujet* [the whole march, advance or progress of the subject]" articulates itself around *das Ding*. That is, the *Nebenmensch als Ding* is "the absolute Other of the subject" that is simultaneously at the heart of the subject, the other within the self that defines what is most central to the subject, a centrality that is not abstract but is completely bound up, for Lacan, with "the world of desires."

However, the really provocative passage on *das Ding* occur a couple of pages further on, for it is here that Lacan will conjure up the spectre of Harpo Marx. I quote at length:

Das Ding is that which I will call the outside-of-the-signified (*le hors-signifié*). It is as a function of the outside-of-the-signified, and from an emotional relation [*rapport pathétique*] with it that the subject keeps its distance and constitutes itself in a kind of relation, primary affect, anterior to all repression. The entire first articulation of the *Entwurf* takes place around it. . . .

Well, here it is in relation to this original *das Ding* that the first orientation, the first choice, the first seat of subjective orientation takes place that we will sometimes call *Neuronenwahl*, the choice of the neurosis. This first grinding [*mouture première*] will henceforth regulate the entire function of the pleasure principle. . . .

Today I only want to insist on this, that the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word [*qu'elle fait mot*], *hits the bull's eye* [*fait mouche*] as one says. In Freud's text, the way in which the stranger, the hostile one, appears in the first experience of reality for the human subject is the cry [*le cri*, which is Lacan's translation of *das Schreien*—s.c.]. I would say that we do not have any need of this cry. Here I would like to make reference to something which is more inscribed in the French rather than the German language—each language has its advantages. In German, *das Wort* is at once word [*mot*] and speech [*parole*]. In French, the word *mot* has a particular weight and sense. *Mot* is essentially "no response" [*pas de réponse*].

Mot, La Fontaine says somewhere, is what is silent [*se tait*], it is precisely that to which no *mot* is spoken. The things in question here—and some people could object to me as being placed at a higher level than the world of signifiers which I have said to you are the true resource of the functioning in man of that process designated as primary—are things insofar as they are mute. And mute things are not exactly the same thing as things that have no relation to words [*paroles*].

It is enough to evoke a figure which will be living to everyone of you, that of the terrible mute of the four Marx Brothers—Harpo. Is there anything which can pose a more present [*présente*], more pressing [*pressante*], more captivating [*prenante*], more disruptive, more nauseating, more calculated to throw into the abyss and nothingness everything that takes place before us, than the figure of Harpo Marx, marked with that smile of which one does not know whether it is that of the most extreme perversity or foolishness. This mute on his own is sufficient to sustain the atmosphere of placing in question and radical annihilation that is the stuff of the formidable farce of the Marx Brothers, of the uninterrupted play of *jokes* [in English in original] that makes their activity so valuable. (*LEP*, 67–69/*EP*, 54–55)

The first couple of paragraphs amplify the thesis presented above, namely, that the relation to *das Ding* is that ‘outside-of-the-signified’ of the relation to the real, a relation to an ‘absolute Other’ that is *un rapport pathétique*, a “primary affect” that is constitutive of the subject. This relation or “first grinding” of the subject governs the entire function of the pleasure principle for Lacan; that is, it overrides the pleasure principle in the name of its beyond.

But—and here is a rather moot point challenged by Kristeva in her discussion of precisely this passage from Seminar VII²¹—*das Ding* only presents itself for Lacan insofar as it becomes word. In Lacanian word play, the Thing *fait mouche* insofar as it *fait mot*, it hits the spot only when it becomes a word. Lacan then refers back to the passage from Freud’s *Entwurf*, where he recalls the point that was discussed above, namely, that the *Nebenmensch* presents itself “*wenn es schreit*.” He then adds significantly that we do not have any need of this scream or cry, a claim which is justified by one of Lacan’s rather opportunistic Franco-German etymologies, where *das Wort* is translated as both *le mot* and *la parole*. That is, *das Ding fait mouche* insofar as it *fait mot*, and *mot* is understood in distinction from what is spoken [*la parole*] as *pas de réponse*, where the word is *ce qui se tait*, that which keeps silent. Thus, in a further play, *les mots* are *les choses muettes*, words are essentially mute. Hence the claim that *le mot* is present where no word is spoken [*parlé*]. The word is unspoken, it is dumb.

It is in connection with this claim about the muteness of the word—a point that could also obviously be made in connection with silent movie comedians like Chaplin and Keaton—and in order to illustrate the relation of the subject to *das Ding*, that Lacan introduces the spectre of Harpo Marx. What Lacan is at the point of saying here is that *das Ding*, as the subject's ethical relation with an alterity that resists comprehension and which is constitutive for subjectivity and ethicality, opens in the experience of *jokes*, in the comic. It is therefore, of course, a question of sublimation, and of what form or forms of symbolization are best able to evoke the in-adequate relation of the subject to *das Ding*. How is one to approach *das Ding*? Lacan privileges tragedy, and this privileging is hardly historically neutral or novel. *Contra* Lacan, I will elsewhere raise the possibility of comedy because my worry is that tragedy is a form of sublimation that risks reducing the trauma of the relation to *das Ding* and disfiguring the problem of finitude.²² There is a risk of losing sight of the ethical dimension to psychoanalysis through its submission to what I call a tragic-heroic paradigm. But that is another story for a separate occasion.

NOTES

1. This text is the bridge between two other texts to which I make reference in the present essay. The first deals with the relation between Levinas and psychoanalysis and attempts to give a reconstruction of Levinasian ethics in terms of the categories of Freud's Second Topography, with particular focus on the question of trauma and the death drive. Cf. "Le traumatisme originel—Levinas avec la psychanalyse," in *Visage et Sinai*. Actes du Colloque *Hommage à Levinas, Rue Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), pp. 165–74. The other text tries to develop a critique of Lacan's use of tragedy, and in particular Sophocles *Antigone*, in his discussions of the ethics of psychoanalysis and goes on to explore the significance of the phenomena of humor, comedy, and laughter for approaching the question of human finitude. Cf. "Comedy and Finitude—Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," in *Constellations*, special issue on psychoanalysis and social theory, forthcoming. All three texts will appear in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity. Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999).
2. *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Livre VII, ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1986, hereafter *LEP*); translated by Dennis Porter under the title *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Book VII, 1959–60 (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 76, hereafter *EP*, with subsequent page references given to original and translation in the text. Cited passages from the Ethics seminar have been retranslated. The only full commentary I know on Seminar VII is Paul Moyaert's excellent *Ethik en sublimatie* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1994). But see also Moyaert's more critical engagement with Seminar VII in "Lacan on Neighbourly Love: The Relation to the Thing in the Other who is my Neighbour,"

- Epoché* 4, no. 1 (1996): 1–31. See also John Rajchman's helpful introductory discussion of Lacan in *Truth and Eros. Foucault, Lacan and the Question of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1991), 28–85. See also Alenka Zupancic, *Die Ethik des Realen* (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 1995). A number of essays on the topic on the ethics of psychoanalysis are collected in *Fragmente. Schriftenreihe zur Psychoanalyse*, nos. 39–40 (1992); see esp. Hans-Dieter Gondek, "Cogito und *séparation*," *infra*, 43–76.
3. On the importance of the *Entwurf*, see, for example, John Forrester's *Le langage aux origines de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
 4. *Entwurf einer Psychologie* was first published in *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse*, ed. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris (London: Imago, 1950), 371–466. Reprinted in *Gesammelte Werke, Nachtragsband, Texte aus den Jahren 1885–1938*, ed. Angela Richards (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1987), 387–487.
 5. See above, note 1.
 6. "L'impossibilité de perdre," in *Les Cahiers de l'Institut de Psycho-Pathologie Clinique*, no. 8 (November 1988), special issue on "Trauma réel, trauma psychique," p. 40.
 7. See Henrich's classic 1960 essay, "The Concept of Moral Insight and Kant's Doctrine of the Fact of Reason," in *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 55–87, esp. 61–67. I owe this reference to Henrich to an ongoing debate with Jay Bernstein. See his critique of my position in "After Auschwitz—Grammar, Ethics, Trauma," unpublished typescript, 1997.
 8. For Lacan's discussion of "Schema L," see "La chose freudienne," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 429–30. In this regard, see Dews, "The Truth of the Subject. Language, Validity and Transcendence in Lacan and Habermas," in *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, ed. S. Critchley and P. Dews (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 149–68.
 9. Obviously, the whole problematic of sublimation in Seminar VII is provoked by the work of Klein and Kleinians, where, in Lacanian terms, sublimation is the symbolic repair of the lesions in the imaginary caused by the real of the mother's body (see esp. "The Object and the Thing," *LEP*, 121–37/*EP*, 101–14). Sublimation is reparation, the work of love. It would also be a question here of linking together the analysis of the subject as trauma as the affect of the real with an analysis of the relation to the female body, specifically the body of the mother that stands in for *das Ding*. Lacan writes:

The whole development of psychoanalysis confirms it in an increasingly weighty manner, while at the same time it emphasizes it less and less. I mean that the whole development at the level of the mother/child interpsychology . . . is nothing more than an immense development of the essential character of the maternal thing, of the mother, insofar as she occupies the place of that thing, of *das Ding*. (*LEP*, 82/*EP*, 67).

And again, with explicit reference to Klein:

Let me suggest to you that you reconsider the whole of Lacanian theory with the following key, namely, Kleinian theory depends on its having situated the mythic body of the mother at the central place of *das Ding*. (*LEP*, 127/*EP*, 106).

10. In this regard, see the extremely interesting French/English parallel edition of Bentham, published with a Lacanian editor, *Theorie des Fictions* (Paris: Éditions de l'Association Freudienne Internationale, 1996). And see in particular the annex to this edition by J. Parin, "Réel et Symbolique chez Jeremy Bentham" (*ibid.*, 3–10).
11. I owe this insight to conversations with Cecilia Sjöholm.
12. See above, note 1. In passing, one might note that the Lacanian thesis on sublimation, in particular its use of tragedy as exemplary in articulating the ethics of psy-

- choanalysis, shows certain similarities with Nietzsche's early—and extremely Schopenhauerian—theory of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche is only mentioned twice in Seminar VII, and not in connection to his theory of tragedy (*LEP*, 38, 194/*EP*, 46, 233–34). For the latter, ancient tragedy was the aesthetic presentation of the fundamental coupling and conflict between the two divine orders of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, which are analogous to *Vorstellung* and *Wille* in Schopenhauer. For Nietzsche, we require the redemptive *Schein* of the Apollinian in order both to reveal the excess of the Dionysian within it, the abyssal “reality of the human condition,” and to save us from contact with that reality.
13. I have tried to analyze Levinas' method in terms of what he calls “the reduction” in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 8, 163–66.
 14. On the vexed question of the aesthetic in Levinas, see Gary Peters's excellent article, “The Rhythm of Alterity: Levinas and Aesthetics,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 82 (1997): 9–16.
 15. *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 161.
 16. I owe these insights to conversations with Axel Honneth.
 17. On prephilosophical experiences in Levinas, see Robrt Bernasconi's “‘Only the Persecuted . . .’: Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed,” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. A. Peperzak (London: Routledge, 1995), 77–86.
 18. *Cahier de l'Herne* (Paris: Herne, 1991), 431–43, hereafter *CH*, with further page references given in the text.
 19. Freud, *Entwurf einer Psychologie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, op. cit., 426–27.
 20. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), 37.
 21. A short while after the publication of *Soleil noir* in 1988 (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), translated by L. Roudiez under the title *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), Kristeva presented a paper to a Parisian psychoanalytic group on the question of trauma (“L'impossibilité de perdre,” op. cit.). Kristeva studies trauma in relation to depression and tries to focus on the object relation maintained by the depressive person, specifically the narcissistically depressed person. The latter is depressed by feeling afflicted by a fundamental fault or lack; their sadness is the expression of an unsymbolizable, unnamable narcissistic wound. That is, the depressed person is depressed not in relation to an object but to *das Ding*. Depression is the dumb articulation of that unknown loss that defines the structure of melancholia in Freud.

For Kristeva, *das Ding* is “the real in rebellion against signification,” the pole of attraction and repulsion, the dwelling place of sexuality from which the object of desire will detach itself. *Das Ding* is the *un soleil noir*, the black sun of melancholia, what Kristeva calls “*une insistance sans présence*,” a light without representation, the unknown object that throws its shadow across the ego. When faced with this seemingly archaic or “prehistoric” attachment to *das Ding*, the depressive person has the impression of being disinherited from an unnamable supreme good.

Now, Kristeva's difference with Lacan is precisely on the interpretation of *das Ding* and refers to the specific passage from Freud's *Entwurf* discussed in Seminar VII:

In commenting on the notion of *das Ding* in Freud's *Entwurf*, Lacan claims that however withdrawn the Freudian Thing may be from judging consciousness, it is always already given in the presence of language.

Kristeva's claim is that Lacan, by making the Thing a word, prioritizes language in the ethical relation to *das Ding*. So—and here Kristeva is making the same point as Schneider—although for Freud *das Ding* presents itself as the scream, Lacan translates

this as *mot*, even if it is a word that remains silent. Thus, Lacan reduces the primary affect of *das Ding* to language. Now, the importance of this is that Lacan, in Kristeva's terms, reduces the *semiotic* to the *symbolic*, that is, he reduces the preverbal affective energy of the drives to linguistic categories. And I think that Kristeva has a point here, and there is something quite willful and wayward about Lacan's attempt to understand the relation to *das Ding* in terms of the word, however widely the latter is understood. In depression, it seems to me, we are transfixed by our Thing, standing mute before its affect, like Harpo. This affect cannot simply be understood linguistically, but subtends the activity of language. The relation to *das Ding* is not the word, but the subjective affect of trauma.

22. See above, note 1.