

Neither inside, nor outside. Considerations on the structure of the subject and of language in Jacques Lacan

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes some considerations on the relations between "subject," "language" and "world" in the perspective of the overcoming of the traditional opposition between "inner" and "outer." I will deal preliminarily with the renewed topicality of the problem of psychologism in the light of the neurosciences, touching on the theme of Being-in in Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a philosopher who valorized the practical and pragmatic dimension of the phenomenological tradition. After that, I will make use of some topological properties of the Möbius strip and of the psychoanalytic investigation of language to illustrate the structure of subjectivity proposed by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981).

0. Introduction

Language is a tangle of subject and world that philosophy strives to unravel by seeking to attribute different meanings to the terms in play. Reflection on the pragmatic basis of semantics can be understood, within our metaphor, as one of the ways offered by contemporaneity to tackle this problematic weave.

This paper proposes some considerations on the relations between "subject," "language" and "world" in the perspective of the overcoming of the traditional opposition between "inner" and "outer." I will deal preliminarily with the renewed topicality of the problem of psychologism in the light of the neurosciences, touching on the theme of Being-in in Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a philosopher who valorized the practical and pragmatic dimension of the phenomenological tradition.¹ After that, I will make use of some topological properties of the Möbius strip and of the psychoanalytic investigation of language to illustrate the structure of subjectivity proposed by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981).

The - obviously unequal - challenge is that of not limiting ourselves to defining in the negative a model of nonpsychologistic subjectivity but rather of providing some indications on a different form of such subjectivity. The outcome is the Lacanian "extimate" ("extimacy," exteriority and intimacy

¹ See Costa (2003), pp. 209-234.

"combined") that, crossing over the opposition between inner and outer, subject and world, permits us, also, to rethink the connection between semantics and pragmatics.

1. *A definition of psychologism*

In the lemmata of philosophical vocabularies we find numerous definitions of psychologism, described as a philosophical perspective that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, interpreted logical thoughts and principles as "psychic events of our mind."² This perspective lives again today in some significant aspects of the philosophy of mind and of reflection on the neurosciences that cast doubt on the autonomy and utility of philosophical reflection with respect to scientific research. On another occasion I attempted to show the affinity of this type of position with the reductionist and, in particular, the logical positivist traditions.³ What we have here is the updating of a classical strategy that transforms experience into a "cast of objective reality," aiming to flatten the *res cogitans* on the *res extensa*.⁴

In the attempt to circumscribe psychologism theoretically I have been aided by some indications offered by the mathematician and phenomenologist Gian-Carlo Rota, who maintained that "one of the common forms of reductionism was 'psychologism' - that is, saying everything was explained by the workings of the brain [...] emotions, religious feelings, poetry, mathematics are all workings of the brain, and if we just figure out how neurons are put together, then we will explain it all. If we want to reduce poetry to the workings of the brain, that is fine. But first, we must understand what poetry is. If we do not understand what poetry is, we will not recognize it *in the brain*."⁵

On this basis I propose, in a provisional and partial form, to define psychologism in terms of a relation of inclusion in virtue of which thoughts are interpreted as the content whose container is the brain.⁶ In these terms, the brain is the place to which meaning is either connected or reduced, according to one's philosophical taste.

I would like to attempt to rethink the problem of place in order to see, in a different perspective, one of the greatest problems of antipsychologism, represented by the necessity of articulating two rifts of reality that, at various

² Costa (2003), p. 9. See Flew (1979), p. 292 and Abbagnano (1960), pp. 713-714.

³ Palombi (2007).

⁴ Costa, Franzini, Spinicci (2002), p. 12.

⁵ Rota (1991), p. 119, my italics. See Palombi (2009), pp. 250-252.

⁶ I deliberately neglect the introspectionistic and consciencialistic meanings of the term that, in this historical phase, are held in lower esteem than the reductionist ones.

times, we express in terms of the difference between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, meaning and facticity, signified and signifier. I propose to think of meaning not in terms of content⁷ without altogether renouncing useful spatiality, from the Platonic hierarchy beyond the heavens to the Freudian topics, to indicate logical relations.

2. The problem of Being-in

We proceed, following Heidegger, to highlight the "necessity of accounting for the unitary moment that precedes the diffraction between inner and outer, psychic and real" traced, as is well known, in the structure of Being-in-the-world.⁸ This is a reformulation of the phenomenological discourse that represents the difference (and the disagreement) between Husserl and Heidegger that was further re-elaborated by Lacan, as we shall see shortly. Lacan is thinking of the analysis of *Being-in* in which Heidegger criticizes the reduction of the relation between Dasein and World to that of the "Being-present-at-hand of some corporeal Thing (such as a human body) *"in"* an entity which is present-at-hand."⁹

In sections 12 and 13 of *Being and Time* Heidegger demonstrates the inadequacy of the traditional opposition between inner and outer that reduces inhood [*Inheit*] to the "kind of being which an entity has when it is 'in' another one" on the basis of the celebrated example of the water in the glass or the garment in the cupboard.¹⁰ This is a fundamental theoretical crux from which stem the problems of truth and of language, understood as general modalities of the relation between words and things.

3. The Möbius strip

Psychoanalysis arises on the paradoxical ridge of the hysterical etiology where somatic causes and psychical reasons merge. The difficult face-off between inner and outer, between inside and outside,¹¹ proceeds in the construction of

⁷ See Cimatti (2004), pp. 78-116, 176-199.

⁸ Costa, Franzini, Spinicci (2002), pp. 270-273; see Heidegger (1927), pp. 78-90. [Page numbers in the notes refer to the English translation when cited.]

⁹ Heidegger (1927), p. 79, my italics.

¹⁰ Heidegger (1927), p. 79. Rota, too, takes up this phenomenological analysis to criticize the limits of a set-theory interpretation of reality; see Palombi (2003), pp. 72-73.

¹¹ See *Freud and the Scene of Writing* in Derrida (1967), pp. 246-291.

its topographical architecture, which "may be expressed in spatial terms, without reference [...] to the actual anatomy of the brain."¹²

Lacan represents a connecting link between our initial phenomenological and current psychoanalytic considerations. Based on cues from the Freudian texts he develops that which, at least to my eyes, is a sort of modelization of Heideggerian Being-in-the-world. The criticism of Lacan's confused eclecticism is well known: his mixing of mathematics and art history, psychoanalysis and linguistics, psychiatry and surrealism. On this occasion I would like to focus on one aspect of this mixture that regards topology, and in particular one of its most celebrated surfaces, represented by the Möbius strip.¹³

Some of the speculations Lacan devotes to this figure are proposed in his ninth and tenth seminars, dedicated, respectively, to identification¹⁴ and to anguish.¹⁵ The strip takes its name from the mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius (1790-1860) who, together with Johann Listing (1806-1882), was the first to study nonorientable topological surfaces.¹⁶ This object which, unlike the usual surfaces, possesses *only one face*, can easily be produced by twisting one of the short sides of a rectangle through 180 degrees and then attaching it to the opposite side. The resulting figure possesses but a single face; in fact, we can paint it entirely without ever lifting our brush from the surface.¹⁷

To comprehend the importance of this characteristic let us recall that normal surfaces, with which we are used to dealing, possess two faces and have the following property: there is no route from one face to the other that does not cross a sort of border called "edge."

This is the case with the sphere, torus and cylinder, for which it is possible to define an inner and an outer face - which is extremely important for our purposes. The surface studied by Möbius is a completely different case, since after having covered it completely we find ourselves in a position opposite to the starting point.¹⁸ It is immersed in a space without dividing it into two regions, without becoming a border between inner and outer.

¹² Freud (1925), p. 35.

¹³ An analogous perspective is presented in Cimatti (2007), connecting psychoanalysis with the philosophy of Wittgenstein.

¹⁴ Lacan (1961-1962).

¹⁵ Lacan (2004).

¹⁶ Without going into the mathematical details, and only for the purposes that concern us here, we define the property of orientability by means of a perpendicular to the surface having a definite sense (direction). If there exists a route along the surface that brings the perpendicular back to the same point, but with its direction (sense) reversed, then the surface is not orientable. In this regard see Kline (1972), vol. II, sec. 50.3.

¹⁷ Kline (1972), vol. II, sec. 50.3.

¹⁸ This phenomenon is indicated by the reversal of the sense of the perpendicular.

Lacan exploits these properties of the Möbius strip to develop that which appears to me to be a modelization of the inhood Heidegger defines in *Being and Time*, in negative terms, emphasizing its difference from the examples of the garment and of the water. The relation of continuity that exists in Heidegger between Dasein and World is indicated by the term "extimate," a Lacanian neologism, which denotes the structure of subjectivity characterized by an "intimate exteriority."¹⁹

The Möbius strip is applied, moreover, to another correlated relation, it too irreducible to the opposition between inner and outer, which subsists between words and things. In fact, Lacan's celebrated thesis that "the unconscious is structured as a language"²⁰ possesses interesting topological consequences. To comprehend its significance let us recall Saussure's famous comparison that assimilates language to a sheet of paper: on the front there is thought, and on the back, sound.²¹ This metaphor is developed thinking of the rectangular figure that, from the topological viewpoint, is a surface that separates the signified and the signifier by means of an edge. Lacan applies to Saussure's sheet of paper a 180-degree torsion that transforms it into the Möbius strip²² to show how the relation between things and words, crossing over the *adaequatio*, takes on the form of the Freudian "rebus," interpretative paradigm of slips²³ and of dreams.²⁴

We need to remember that, in the context of studies on the linguistics of de Saussure, this idea has been developed by Lo Piparo, who uses the Möbius strip²⁵ to show that "in the verbal language there is no discontinuity between signified and signifier [...]: the twofold face of the verbal sign is nothing more than a didactic fiction which [...] from a theoretical point of view can show to be misleading."²⁶

¹⁹ Lacan (1986), p. 177 [French edition].

²⁰ Lacan (1969), p. 163. This is a concept that was examined a number of times in Lacan's texts but that, in this interview, is proposed in terms that are particularly clear and useful for our purposes. In fact Lacan continues: "this is not an analogy, I really want to say that its structure is that of language [...]. Before the new linguistics was born, Freud had already invented it. You asked about what distinguishes me from Freud: well, the answer is right here, in the fact that I know linguistics [...]. I can say this because linguistics arose a few years after psychoanalysis. Saussure began it shortly after Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, had written a full-fledged treatise of linguistics. This is my 'distance' from Freud" (Lacan, 1969, pp. 163-164).

²¹ de Saussure (1972), p. 157

²² See Chemama, Vandermeresch (1998), s.v. "topology".

²³ Freud (1901), p. 14.

²⁴ Lacan (1966), p. 260 [French edition]. Lacan cites Freud (1899).

²⁵ Lo Piparo (1991), pp. 219-220.

²⁶ *Id.*, p. 217.

The property of this topological figure possessing a single face, allows the Italian scholar to shed an interesting light on inseparability and unity of the linguistic entity as theorized by de Saussure.²⁷

Within the range of our psychoanalytical interests we must underline that, for Freud, the dream is an "original writing" in which "words have the same valence as things and vice versa."²⁸ Mixture is the rule of composition of the unconscious that escapes the opposition between words and things, which retraces, from some points of view, the opposition between inner and outer.

4. *The torsion of the subject*

My idea consists in thinking of the structure of the Lacanian subject as a generative torsion that transforms us into a Möbius strip. Playing on the double sense - objective and subjective - of the genitive, we could speak of the subject as torsion. Our subjectivity is only secondarily, and derivatively, the intimacy of a thinking that is opposed to the exteriority of the world. The primordial movement, constitutively lost, that generates, together, consciousness and the unconscious²⁹ is a torsion in virtue of which we are *neither inside nor outside* any longer.

But where, then, are we? This is a question that belongs both to the structure and to the genesis of the subject. We could answer that we are always elsewhere because no absolute border between inner and outer exists, and thus has to be continually redefined. In this regard we are given another interesting indication by the Möbius strip, which locally conserves the opposition between above and below (and thus in some way between internal and external), but, globally, the opposition proves derived with respect to the connection.

There is no identity but only a process of identification that accompanies us throughout our existence, obliging us to reflect and to redefine, in every single point, that which belongs to us and that which is extraneous. It is not fortuitous that precisely in the seminar dedicated to identification Lacan reflects on topology. We are a phenomenon that is Heideggerianly unitary but Lacanianly always and still to be constituted. I would like to conclude by attempting, in the light of what I have briefly sketched, to reinterpret some typical situations that lead us, for example, to perceive stimuli but to see injustices.

²⁷ *Id.*, p. 218.

²⁸ D'Alessandro (1980), p. 175.

²⁹ This perspective also accounts for the weave of phenomenology and psychoanalysis.

How is it possible that in the simple muscular contraction of the face of a man at work, in the tension of his muscles or, worse still, in his neuronal hum, we can see exploitation? The question is badly put insofar as it presupposes, psychologically, the problem of the reconstruction of a concept interpreted as abstract and internal on the basis of perceptive stimuli and physical bodies thought of as concrete and external. This is not the phenomenological or even the psychoanalytic sense of experience, this is not a realist attitude insofar as the form of subjectivity cannot be reduced to such oppositions.

From this perspective the realism of the "neurophilosophies" appears less convincing and, in any case, my preference goes to the Lacanian surrealism that fuses things and words, waking and sleeping. Our experience is a continual association of abstract and concrete elements, of values and stimuli, of emotions and objectivity. And, to put it bluntly, notions such as neurons, nervous system, brain "have not come from nowhere, but have been constituted on the basis of our experience."³⁰ On the one hand, they legitimately aspire to explain how our thinking functions; on the other, they possess a historical constitution that epistemology and phenomenology investigate in their stratifications. They are, on one hand, things, but on the other, words.

They possess a historical nature that has set them, *après-coup*, retroactively in experience itself and now there they are together with values with "a giddy air of always-having-been-around-ness."³¹ Phenomenology investigates stratifications of meaning and their constitution but psychoanalytic surrealism confirms that it, often, takes the form of juxtaposition.

The stars, on the vault of heaven, appear close to one another but in reality this is by no means the case; and yet this perspective flattening represents the condition of possibility of charting the constellations and the signs of the zodiac. The latter, while unmasked by astronomers, still have their place in newspapers and on television to remind us of our history. That which takes place in a court of law presents the same perspective flattening. In the pronouncing of a sentence causes and reasons, facts and emotions all contribute, perspectively flattening on the legal plane things and ideals, jealousies and economic interests, explanation and comprehension.

Let us describe a hypothetical laboratory interior in which we find a neuroscientist who is observing himself; we do not know whether this thought experiment can be performed at present, but it does not seem excessively

³⁰ Costa, Franzini, Spinicci (2002), p. 317.

³¹ Rota (1973), p. 249. For Heidegger "there are coverings-up which are accidental; there are also some which are necessary, grounded in what the thing discovered consists in" (Heidegger, 1927, p. 60).

science-fictional. In the room we find a computer screen on which the scientist is examining the visualization of his own cerebral areas produced by means of PET or NMR³² techniques that phenomenologically constitute, in this imaginary situation, the neuroscientist's intentional focus. The screen is set on a table, next to it a photograph holder frames a family photo, hanging on the walls we see diplomas and perhaps the poster of a football team. His gaze is focused on the digital images but then the phone rings, the scientist gives a start and shifts his eyes towards the photo.

What has happened? Should we say that the focusing of his gaze has shifted from the presumed interior of his brain to the perceptive exterior because of the phone call? That a material cause has produced a shift from the concreteness of physical data to the abstraction of affects? That these affects, in their turn epiphenomena of the scientist's neurons, have been activated to evoke the memory of a loved one?

I consider all these to be misunderstandings, caused by the "neurophilosophical" confusion between experiment and experience that calls the quantitative representation of a laboratory phenomenon empirical fact, forgetting, moreover, that such a representation presupposes the mathematical dimension, which, indeed, is not empirical.³³ Let us dwell on this aspect to recall that, in its turn, mathematics ought to be in the cerebral areas, leading to the paradox in which the brain is contained in itself.

Such argumentation reproduces the paradoxical structure of Putnam's celebrated argument of the brain in the tub, in which the term "tub" has two meanings: the first indicates the container of the brain; the second, everyday experience, the phenomenon that as such is contained in the brain.³⁴

These considerations seek to exemplify the inadequacy of the interpretation of the relation between the inner and the outer of subjectivity in terms of opposition and to repropose the necessity of a connection between them, of which the Möbius strip represents a model. The scientist, or more often the philosopher, claims to separate something that is inextricably united, which perspectively produces the juxtaposition of different ontological regions. For this reason we need to distance ourselves also from psychoanalytically-oriented positions claiming that psychoanalysis and neurosciences have no points of intersection.³⁵ Between them neither

³² PET (Positron Emission Tomography) and NMR (Nuclear Magnetic Resonance).

³³ The - philosophical and nonscientific - attempt to reconstruct the totality of experience on the basis of neuronal activations bears great resemblances with the phenomenistically- or physicalistically-oriented attempts of the logical positivists, and we can expect it to come up against very similar difficulties; see Palombi (2007).

³⁴ See Chiodo (2007), p. 41.

³⁵ Laurent (2005), p. 9.

integration nor reduction is possible, but rather a collation that makes it explicit how they are different perspectives of an investigation of reality that is, in any event, unitary in the Lacanian form of the surrealist collage.

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