

“The object in the mirror of genetic transcendentalism: Lacan’s *objet petit a* between visibility and invisibility,”

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Abstract One of the more superficially perplexing features of Lacan’s notion of *objet petit a* is the fact that he simultaneously characterizes it as both non-specularizable (i.e., incapable of being captured in spatio-temporal representations) and specular (i.e., incarnated in visible avatars). This assignment of the apparently contradictory attributes of visibility and invisibility to object *a* is a reflection of this object’s strange position at the intersection of transcendental and empirical dimensions. Indeed, this object, which Lacan holds up as his central psychoanalytic discovery, raises important philosophical questions about the transcendental-empirical distinction, arguably short-circuiting in interesting, productive ways this dichotomy and many of its permutations. This article seeks to achieve two aims: one, to clarify how and why Lacan situates object *a* between the specular and the non-specular; and, two, to extract from the results of this clarification a preliminary sketch of a post-Lacanian transcendentalism that is also thoroughly materialist.

Keywords Lacan · Mirror stage · Object *a* · Transcendentalism · Materialism · Hegel

The object of Jacques Lacan’s thirteenth seminar of 1965–1966, entitled “The Object of Psychoanalysis,” is, unsurprisingly, none other than his (in)famous *objet petit a*, the object for which he takes the credit of discovering.¹ In the opening session of this academic year, a session written-up and published separately as the *écrit* “Science and Truth,” Lacan establishes a sharp contrast between scientific

¹ Lacan (1973–1974, April 9th, 1974).

savoir and the type of knowledge at stake in the analytic experience; whereas object *a* is the privileged focus of analysis,² this strange (non-)entity is excluded from the fields covered by the sciences proper.³ Nonetheless, scientificity isn't left alone to go its own way unharassed within its *Weltanschauung* after this line of demarcation between it and the acosmos of analytic reality is drawn in "*La science et la vérité*." Lacan proceeds ambitiously to outline and argue for transformations of the sciences on the basis of an acknowledgement that the range of structures and phenomena signified by this little *a* (such as desires, drives, fantasies, and the subject-configuring formations of the unconscious associated therewith) are, as he would put it, "not without" (*pas sans*)⁴ relevance for the operations of the sciences themselves. To employ a Lacanian neologism, *objet petit a* is here characterized as being "extimate" (i.e., intimately exterior) to non-analytic science.⁵ If psychoanalysis is anything close to a discipline that produces a peculiar sort of scientific *savoir*, it does so, at least in part, as a procedure centered on the gesture of making this implicit, unavowed extimacy avowedly explicit.

Obviously, whole books easily could be written on the topic of the Lacanian *objet a*, given that this object functions as a nodal point (or, in still more Lacanese, a *point de capiton* [quilting point]) across a vast and richly intricate expanse of the French Freud's mature teachings. This *a* quickly becomes, after Lacan's introduction of it as a concept-term to his theoretical arsenal in the late 1950s, a condensed knot of associated meanings and references tied together with varying degrees of tightness over time. In this present contribution, restricted as it is to a close reading of *Seminar XIII*, I am interested in a very precise problem that can and should generate puzzling questions about object *a*. This problem is prominently on display in the academic year 1965–1966. Therein, as elsewhere both before and after, Lacan casts the object of his version of psychoanalysis in two apparently-in-tension fashions: On the one hand, *objet a* is said to be "non-specularizable," namely, impossible to inscribe within the spatio-temporal registers of representation (*à la* Freud's *Vorstellung*) as one object among others⁶; On the other hand, it is equated with a series of determinate libidinal coordinates (i.e., breast, feces, phallus, gaze, and voice), coordinates marked by entities and events situated in space and time and amenable to apprehension as *Vorstellungen*.⁷ How can this object simultaneously be utterly beyond representability in space and time and yet concretely incarnated in "specularizable" spatio-temporal avatars? My modest agenda in what follows primarily is to clarify this enigma. Although the thirteenth seminar will furnish the guiding threads for this investigation, I will be forced to make forays into earlier and later portions of Lacan's *oeuvre* in order thoroughly to treat the issue of *objet petit a* as situated between the specular and the non-specular. After this exercise in clarification, I will address a

² Lacan (1961–1962, June 27th, 1962).

³ Lacan (2006e, pp. 733, 742, 1965–1966, December 8th, 1965).

⁴ Lacan (1958–1959, February 11th, 1959, 2004, p. 105, 1965–1966, January 5th, 1966).

⁵ Johnston (2012a).

⁶ Lacan (1965–1966, January 12th, 1966, January 19th, 1966, March 30th, 1966, June 1st, 1966).

⁷ Lacan (May 4th, 1966, May 18th, 1966, June 1st, 1966, June 8th, 1966, June 15th, 1966).

more philosophical matter that arises out of a consideration of these dimensions of *objet a*: Lacan's complicated relations with transcendentalism.

Within the confines of the thirteenth seminar, Lacan introduces the non-specular status of object *a* through a comparison of it with the Möbius band, one of his favorite topological structures⁸ (with topology being a mathematical science of configurations formed through continuous series of permutations of surfaces—Lacan's turns to topology enable him to abandon the problematic Euclidean geometrical picture-thinking permeating the depth-psychological discourse, with its misleading metaphors of outer layers and inner recesses, from which he rightly wants to dissociate Freudian psychoanalysis⁹). As is common knowledge, this sort of strip is a single surface twisted such that uninterrupted movement along it transports one between two opposed faces. The distinguishing warp of the Möbius band makes two seemingly separate sides seamlessly communicate with one another; this twist is the mere inflection of a single surface nonetheless generating a manifest distinction between a recto and a verso. The comparison between *objet a* and the Möbius strip already suggests that this *a* is to be construed as an insubstantial distortion of the lone immanent plane of psychical reality, a contortion forming a switch-point at which apparently separate conscious and unconscious dimensions intersect and pass into each other.¹⁰ In the session of *Seminar XIII* following this introduction of object *a qua* non-specularizable via topology—however, it should be noted that Lacan begins insisting on *a*'s non-specular status several years earlier (in the ninth seminar)¹¹ and repeats this insistence regularly thereafter¹²—any appearance of this analytic object is said to defy capture by mirroring, to reflect nothing in reflecting devices.¹³ Like a vampire, whose menacing shadowy presence is disturbingly palpable and yet an invisible blank in the clear surfaces of surrounding mirrors, *objet petit a* tangibly haunts its subject in a similarly elusive, hard-to-see fashion.

As subtly testified to by the associative link between the “little *a*” of the “object of psychoanalysis” and Lacan's theory of the ego (involving the Imaginary *petit autre*, as opposed to the Symbolic *grand Autre*),¹⁴ the renowned account of the mirror stage is relevant to any thorough consideration of the Lacanian *objet petit a*. In fact, as regards its standing at the intersection of visibility and invisibility (or, to utilize a turn of phrase from Lacan's famed 1949 reflections on mirroring, at “the threshold of the visible world”¹⁵), the various versions of and revisions to the

⁸ Lacan (January 12th, 1966).

⁹ Granon-Lafont (1985, p. 106), Dor (1992, pp. 123–124, 129, 135, 193–195), Lavendhomme (2001, pp. 10–12, 52), Miller (2004, p. 36).

¹⁰ Lacan (1961–1962, January 10th, 1962, May 16th, 1962, 1976–1977, December 14th, 1976, December 21st, 1976, 1978–1979, November 10th, 1978).

¹¹ Lacan (1961–1962, May 30th, 1962).

¹² Lacan (1961–1962, June 6th, 1962, June 20th, 1962, 2004, pp. 73, 164, 294, 1964–1965, February 3rd, 1965, 1966–1967, June 7th, 1967, 2006f, pp. 300–305).

¹³ Lacan (1965–1966, January 19th, 1966).

¹⁴ Evans (1996, pp. 124–125, 132–133).

¹⁵ Lacan (2006a, p. 77).

narrative of this stage are indispensable textual resources for the struggle to make sense of the otherwise baffling convergence of the opposites of the specular and the non-specular.

But, before returning to the Lacanian mirror stage, a little more preliminary framing is in order. In two consecutive sessions of the thirteenth seminar, Lacan compares the place and function of object *a* to that of a window.¹⁶ He observes that, in mediating between the looking subject and the looked-at scene of objects, the window subsists as unseen; to employ a Jamesonian phrase dear to Slavoj Žižek, it's a "vanishing mediator" between seer and seen (or, as cognitivist philosopher Thomas Metzinger puts it apropos the filtering virtual "self-model" through which the brain takes in the world, a model perhaps partially comparable to the unreal-yet-non-epiphenomenal Lacanian ego [*moi*], "Transparency is a special form of darkness"¹⁷). This window metaphor—Lacan no doubt also has in the back of his mind the window in the Wolf Man's dream—underscores the centrality of *objet a* in Lacan's account of (fundamental) fantasy (whose "matheme" is, of course, $\$ \diamond a$). Despite the semantic shifts exhibited by the different uses of this concept-term over the years of his teachings—such developing drifts similarly enrich quite a few other key Lacanian concept-terms across the sprawling span of his corpus—the central structuring role of *objet petit a* in the fantasmatic formations of the unconscious remains a feature of it constantly and consistently emphasized by Lacan. Borrowing some philosophical language (which soon will be crucial here), this quasi-transcendental object is a "cursor" or "index" of the position of desiring subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the reality of its desired empirical objects¹⁸ (with the latter empirical objects being the effects of the former quasi-transcendental object *qua* "cause of desire," as per a phrase essential to the Lacanian definition of *objet a*).¹⁹

So, with this frame in place, how is the mirror stage relevant to the project of elucidating the status of object *a* as in-between visibility and invisibility? An answer to this question can begin with a detail contained in the 1949 narration of this stage contained in *Écrits*. Therein, Lacan, speaking of "the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking, or even standing"²⁰ (i.e., an infant, a nascent subject-to-be, still very much mired in the affective muck of an anxiety-inducing prematurational helplessness [Freud's *Hilflosigkeit*] igniting the trajectories of identification²¹), describes the young child in this psychoanalytic *Ur*-situation as "held tightly by some prop, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a *trotte-bébé* [a sort of walker])."²² This detail comes to serve as a lever for certain of Lacan's later recastings of the mirror stage. These recastings are deployed so as to combat crude developmentalist (mis)readings of his theory according to which Imaginary identification with the *imago-Gestalt* of the *moi* is a phase

¹⁶ Lacan (1965–1966, May 11th, 1966, May 18th, 1966).

¹⁷ Metzinger (2003, p. 169).

¹⁸ Lacan (1958–1959, April 8th, 1959, June 10th, 1959).

¹⁹ Johnston (2012a).

²⁰ Lacan (2006a, pp. 75–76).

²¹ Freud (1926, pp. 154–155, 167), Lacan (2001a, pp. 33–34, 2006a, pp. 76, 78).

²² Lacan (2006a, p. 76).

chronologically situated between a prior phase of immersion in the “blooming, buzzing confusion” (as William James would describe it) of the primitive Real and a posterior phase of ascension to the proper social mediation of Symbolic structures setting in with language acquisition. Whether, in combating this linear-developmental interpretation of the earlier versions of the mirror stage, the later, post-1949 Lacan is engaging in a mere shift of emphasis (as he depicts it) or a fundamental, wholesale revision retroactively informed by hindsight is not important in the current context.

In seminars eight, ten, and twelve, the *trotte-bébé*, as an inert, inhuman object, drops out of the picture, with only the speaking subjectivity (*parlêtre*) of older Otherness remaining instead.²³ This shift already is foreshadowed in “Some Reflections on the Ego,” Lacan’s first text in English delivered orally to the British Psycho-Analytical Society in 1951 and published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* in 1953; therein, a human support for the child is mentioned side-by-side with inanimate devices such as walkers.²⁴ These post-1949 presentations of the mirror stage in *le Séminaire* insist upon the necessary role of a parental “big Other”—such a figure is both physically bigger (i.e., not prematurationally helpless like the infant) as well as an instantiation of the socio-symbolic *grand Autre*—in initially prompting and thereafter maintaining the small child’s multi-level investments (simultaneously cognitive, affective, and libidinal²⁵) in his/her “self-image.” Identification by the germinal subject *à venir* with the *Gestalt* of the *imago* in the reflective surface of the mirror is triggered by bigger supporting Other-subjects who communicate encouragements of and urgings to latch onto the image by employing a combination of words and gestures (i.e., linguistic and proto/quasi-linguistic mechanisms—the archetypal example of this would be the mother’s speech exclaiming things like “That’s you there!” while she points with her index finger at the reflection of the delicate, diminutive body held up to the mirror).

With this shift of emphasis onto the accompanying parental figure, the later Lacan of the 1960s suggests, as he does in other cases too when casting a backwards glance over his earlier work,²⁶ that the primacy of the register of the Symbolic, with its signifying structures independent of the Imaginary, already is posited in the 1930s and 1940s versions of his account of ego formation (*contra* the commonplace periodization of Lacan’s intellectual itinerary according to which the Imaginary holds sway in the ‘30s and ‘40s, to be deposed by the Symbolic in the ‘50s, which is then in turn, in the final phase of the ‘60s and ‘70s, made subservient to the Real). Especially for this later Lacan, the *imago-Gestalt* of the *moi* is overdetermined from the start by the pre-existent universe of signifiers into which the child is thrown (a thrown-ness preceding even the biological moment of birth) and within which his/her specular reflection is embedded and contextualized. From the get-go, the image is suffused by the mediation of the signifier, rather than being a self-sufficient,

²³ Lacan (2001b, pp. 415–416, 2004, pp. 42, 52, 142, 1964–1965, February 3rd, 1965), Fink (1997, p. 88), De Waelhens and Ver Eecke (2001, pp. 74–75), Johnston (2008b, pp. 213–214).

²⁴ Lacan (1953, p. 15).

²⁵ Lacan (2006a, p. 76, 1953, p. 14).

²⁶ Johnston (2005, pp. 23–57).

stand-alone phenomenal immediacy unto itself only secondarily taken up into symbolico-linguistic constellations. The upshot of this is that figurative, metaphorical “mirroring” of the tiny, fragile human by the more-than-visual looks, gesticulations, and utterances of the larger people involved in this situation is a prior possibility condition for the literal, non-metaphorical mirroring fixated upon the spectacle of the (“self”-)image. In the latter, the sight of the picture of the whole body contained in a shiny, reflective surface becomes an alluring, captivating mirage of anticipated cohesion and mastery, a virtual reality eliciting triumphant jubilation and provoking venomous aggression (aroused by envy and frustration *vis-à-vis* this unattainable ideal) at one and the same time.²⁷

In the updated, 1960s version of the mirror stage, language-using (and language-used) big(ger) Others bathe the infant in a cascade of statements and behaviors whose saturating effects endow the specular components of the mirroring moment, Lacan’s primal scene of inaugural identification, with their special, fateful status. The *petit a(utre)* of the child’s forming ego, partially bound up with imagistic representation, is originally and primordially a precipitate of “the desire of the Other.” In other words, this *moi* begins condensing on the basis of the conscious and unconscious fantasies of the familial actors surrounding the child, actors who both wittingly and unwittingly transfer their desire-organizing fantasies regarding the child’s past, present, and future into his/her psyche via the discourses and actions through which they frame the mirror-experience for him/her. Insofar as the ego itself, as what becomes intimate “me-ness,” is born by crystallizing around a core kernel of external Other-subjects’ fantasy-formations, it could be said to be an instance of extimacy in Lacan’s precise sense of this neologism. Put differently, at the very nucleus of the recognized “me” resides a misrecognized (*à la* Lacanian *méconnaissance*) “not-me,” something “in me more than myself,” as the Lacan of the eleventh seminar (1964) might phrase it. Similarly, invisible traces of alterity, impressed upon the body-image by desire/fantasy-conveying Others (with their gazes, voices, demands, loves, *jouissance*, and so on), are infused into the visible avatars of this estranging, ego-level identity, this “self” created and sustained within a crucible of unsurpassable otherness. Circumnavigating back to a previously-glossed segment of *Seminar XIII* (a seminar following on the heels of these then-recent re-envisionings of the mirror stage), one could say that the desires of Others inscribe a Möbius-type twist within the surface of the mirror such that the specular side of the “little other” of the Imaginary ego/alter-ego axis (i.e., *a—a'*) is in seamless continuity with its constituting *envers qua* the non-specular (and largely unconscious) flip-side of libidinal and socio-symbolic forces and factors stretched across vast swathes of different-but-overlapping temporalities.

With all of the above now in view, including the immediately prior hint here regarding a *rapprochement* between the specular and non-specular sides of *objet petit a*, I want to return to Lacan’s thirteenth seminar. To begin with, Lacan, in the session of January 5th, 1966, confirms much of my preceding reading. He reminds his listeners that “the letter *a*” indeed marks a red thread connecting his early musings about mirrors with his subsequent discussions of *a qua* object of

²⁷ Lacan (2001a, pp. 30–45, 2006a, pp. 75–81, 2006b, pp. 82–101).

psychoanalysis. By drawing attention to the fact that he abbreviates the identified-with “alienating image” at the nucleus of the ego as $i(a)$ —this is by contrast with, for instance, “ $i(S)$ ” as designating “the image of the ‘self’”—Lacan stresses that the misrecognized “me” of the ego (*moi*) is a by-product of the subject-to-be being “captured” by the alterity of Imaginary others (i.e., alter-egos) and Symbolic Others.²⁸

Further on, in the session of March 30th, 1966 (and foreshadowing the previously-mentioned window metaphor introduced a couple of months later during this same academic year), Lacan ties the a at the heart of the ego to the “framing” function of a as object-cause of desire. He refers to the matheme of fantasy (i.e., $\$ \diamond a$) and equates the a in this matheme with the $i(a)$ of the seductive, specular *imago*, a *Gestalt* grounding a “series of identifications enveloping one another, being added together, being concretized like the layers of a pearl, in the course of development of what is called the ego”²⁹ (Lacan elsewhere compares the ego to an onion, with a void as the empty center of its multiple layers of skin, themselves successive series of identifications accumulated over the course of the subject’s life history³⁰). But, Lacan quickly proceeds to warn, this reference back to the mirror stage shouldn’t cue his audience to conclude that a is of a fundamentally Imaginary *qua* specular/visual nature. This warning leads directly into his invocation of the idea of the frame (*bâti, cadre*).³¹ He also suggests the appropriateness in this vein of the noun-form of the word “*practicable*” as related to the world of theater (in which this noun designates a kind of staging platform).³²

Whether as window, frame, or platform, *objet petit a* circumscribes a space of visibility within which an ontogenetic sequence of coming-and-going specular-empirical objects appear (as the *Vorstellungen* of given conscious and unconscious fantasy-formations organizing desires). Moreover, a does this while itself tending to remain in the shadows off-stage, functioning instead as the invisible transcendental condition of possibility (i.e., the cause of desire) for the visible parade of desired empirical objects³³ (including the ego itself, with its inherent ego-ideals, as a schematizing template for the desires of he/she who identifies with this object *qua* fixed, frozen “self”-image³⁴). Relating this to the mirror stage, the matheme $i(a)$, standing for the *imago-Gestalt* of the *moi*, is significant precisely in that it places something (or, rather, some Thing [*das Ding, la Chose*]) non-specular (i.e., a) at the very heart of the specular (i.e., i). In the *Ur*-event of identification, the primal scene of mirroring, the child’s entranced enchantment by the power-and-salvation-promising image in the shiny surface leaves him/her blind to the surrounding framing functions—these functions include the looks, gestures, speech, and various expressions of interest in the body of the child by its supporting big(ger)

²⁸ Lacan (1965–1966, January 5th, 1966).

²⁹ Lacan (March 30th, 1966).

³⁰ Lacan (1988a, p. 171).

³¹ Lacan (1965–1966, March 30th, 1966).

³² Lacan (1965–1966, March 30th, 1966).

³³ Lacan (May 18th, 1966).

³⁴ Lacan (May 25th, 1966).

Others—responsible for constituting (invisibly off-stage, as it were) this visually-mediated experience as what it appears to be. Lacan's list of spatio-temporally incarnate instances of object *a* (again, breast, feces, phallus, gaze, and voice) makes a lot of sense in this connection. These specular, body-related libidinal coordinates are the visible placeholders, the objective representational inscriptions, of the impossible-to-pin-down, non-objectifiable (hence non-specularizable) desire of the Other(s), a desire setting in motion and decisively influencing the temporally-elongated taking-shape of the ego as initially rooted in reference to a visual register. All of this is compactly conveyed by the abbreviation *i(a)*.

Having thus gained a preliminary handle on how and why *objet a* is repeatedly said by Lacan to be non-specular while simultaneously also being associated with a range of specular(izable) avatars, certain philosophical issues are raised by the juxtaposition (one might be tempted to characterize it as an under-explained Hegelian convergence of opposites) of the transcendental and empirical implicit in these facets of Lacanian theory—and this insofar as *objet petit a*, Lacan's central analytic “discovery,” is both transcendental *qua* non-specular(izable), as the fantasy-constellation(s) “causing” desire, and empirical *qua* specular(izable), as the concatenation of tangible spatio-temporal object-choices “caused” by desire and its fantasies. What's more, the crossroads occupied by this strange, special object is even more confusingly tangled and twisted from a perspective informed by the history of philosophy in that this object's purportedly transcendental dimensions seem to arise ontogenetically from empirical events and experiences in the embodied individual's life history (and, perhaps, the former dimensions also might be reacted back upon dialectically by the latter sort of events and experiences). One of the biggest stakes lurking in the background of Lacan's psychoanalytic reflections regarding his *a* is a possible recasting of the basic, fundamental distinction between the transcendental and the empirical as first entrenched in its now-familiar forms by Kant's critical project. At this juncture, Bernard Baas' excellent work on the rapport between Lacanianism and transcendentalism is extremely helpful and worth examining.

Baas is neither the first nor the most recent scholar of Lacan's thought to propose the existence of substantial links between Kant's transcendental philosophy and the former's version of psychoanalysis. However, in addition to Alenka Zupančič's *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (2000), his books *Le désir pur: Parcours philosophiques dans les parages de J. Lacan* (1992) and *De la chose à l'objet: Jacques Lacan et la traversée de la phénoménologie* (1998) are two of the most thorough examinations of the lines of continuity (as well as pivotal points of contrast) between Kant and Lacan. Starting in the first of these two books, Baas argues that the Lacanian theory of desire short-circuits the strict Kantian distinction between the transcendental and the empirical.³⁵ And, with ample justification, he identifies Lacan's object *a*, the “cause of desire” essential to fantasies as central formations of the unconscious, as situated at the intersection of these two realms between the Real of *das Ding* (i.e., *la Chose* [the Thing]) *qua* transcendental and the Imaginary-Symbolic reality of the manifold of concrete, particular desired objects

³⁵ Baas (1992, pp. 24–26).

situated in space and time.³⁶ In Kantian parlance, *objet petit a*, according to Baas, is a fantasmatic template “schematizing” desire, a skeletal virtual structure organizing and making possible desire’s relations with specific actual entities and occurrences.³⁷ He underscores that, “*Objet a*, in effect, cannot be identified with an empirical object, even if, in experience, it is necessarily related to empirical objects.”³⁸ Hence, if sensible visibility is a quality of the empirical and insensible invisibility one of the transcendental, then Baas’ philosophical contextualization of Lacan’s *a*-centered account of desire provides additional clarification as to why this strange object is depicted by Lacan as simultaneously specular (insofar as it’s “not without” [*pas sans*] a rapport with spatio-temporal things) and non-specular. Unlike Kant’s “pure,” *apriori* transcendental as entirely separate and distinct from the *aposteriori* empirical, Lacan’s transcendental is “impure” in that it both ontogenetically arises from empirical entities and occurrences, such as in the above-glossed renditions of the mirror stage—thus, this impure transcendentalism could be characterized as genetic, as opposed to the static nature of the traditional Kantian variety—as well as continues thereafter, following this emergence, to be entangled in determinate instantiations of desire which it conditions.

Baas’ later *De la chose à l’objet* further fleshes out his theses in *Le désir pur* summarized in the preceding paragraph.³⁹ What’s more, he goes on to integrate post-Kantian phenomenology into his narrative. Baas maintains that Lacan’s impure genetic transcendentalism carries him beyond Kant in ways closely parallel to those pursued by phenomenology from Edmund Husserl through Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁴⁰ (Richard Boothby similarly makes an extremely eloquent case for pursuing a substantial rapprochement between Lacanian psychoanalysis and phenomenology both transcendental and existential⁴¹). In the final sub-section (entitled “The Unassignable Object”) of his treatment of *objet petit a*, Baas distinguishes between two angles of view on Lacan’s *a*: a Kantian-synchronic angle and a Merleau-Pontian-diachronic one.⁴² The former would be static and atemporal (with object *a* figuring therein as a schematizing template for desire) while the latter would be genetic and temporal (with object *a* featuring therein as an emergent phenomenon coming to mediate over time between the *jouissance*-saturated Thing and spatio-temporal objects). In my 2005 book *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*, I argue that the distinction Baas draws here isn’t merely a difference between two irreconcilable theoretical perspectives, but, instead, an intra-theoretical reflection of an extra-theoretical (i.e., real *qua* objective) split between two axes (what I dub the “axis of iteration” and “axis of alteration”) constitutive of the libidinal economy as conceived at the intersection of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-Kantian philosophy. This can be construed as a Hegelian gesture

³⁶ Baas (1992, pp. 68–71, 108–109).

³⁷ Baas (1992, pp. 73–74).

³⁸ Baas (1992, p. 145).

³⁹ Baas (1998, pp. 21–25, 38, 53–55).

⁴⁰ Baas (1998, pp. 58–59).

⁴¹ Boothby (1991, pp. 203–214, 2001, pp. 31–69).

⁴² Baas (1998, p. 82).

with respect to the more Kantian stance of Baas,⁴³ with Hegel being the giant standing between Kant before him and Husserl et al. after him.

That said, Baas comes to vacillate with regard to his earlier-articulated reconstruction of Lacan's supposed transcendentalism. In the space of just three pages, he moves from downplaying the transcendental features of *objet a*⁴⁴—this leads him to conclude that, “It functions *like (comme)* a transcendental, but without being a transcendental”⁴⁵—to reaffirming that Lacan is engaged in “a certain scrambling (*brouillage*) of the philosophical distinction between the empirical and the transcendental.”⁴⁶ Admittedly, these assertions could be squared with each other on a sympathetic reading. But, even so, a tension arguably is present here between, on the one hand, claiming that Lacan isn't really a transcendentalist when all is said and done, and, on the other hand, claiming that he seeks to redefine and redeploy the transcendental through reconsidering the Kantian manner of contrasting it with the empirical. If indeed there is this tension, then the questions to be asked are: Can and should it be resolved? And, if so, how?

Having reached this juncture, I wish to put forward a number of enchainé suggestions for resolving Baas' impasse. To begin with—I allusively hinted at this in passing a few moments ago—a heightened role for Hegel in this discussion of Kant *avec* Lacan promises to be productive. Of course, much has been written on Lacanian analytic thinking with respect to Hegelian philosophy; Žižek's monumental contributions to Lacan scholarship obviously spring to mind. It would be neither possible nor useful for me to rehearse the full sweep of what already has been published dealing with the Hegel-Lacan relationship. Instead, I will advance a handful of bluntly-formulated proposals. What follows is a programmatic preview of directions in which my current research is moving nowadays.⁴⁷

Mobilizing fashions of speaking appropriate in a context in which psychoanalysis is front-and-center, Hegel can be portrayed as interested in geneticizing Kantian transcendentalism along both phylogenetic (as social, rather than natural, history) and ontogenetic lines (additionally, it could be asserted that, while Hegelian philosophy is more focused on the phylogenetic *qua* socio-historical, Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis foregrounds to a much greater degree ontogenetic subject-formation). Hegel's post-Kantian historicist sensibilities, as both post-Kantian and historicist, mean that, well before Baas' Lacan, he too short-circuits the transcendental-empirical couplet (as Michel Foucault would put it) without simply repudiating transcendentalism altogether in favor of a crude socio-historical constructivism. From the Jena *Phenomenology of Spirit* through the Berlin *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel develops and deploys a temporal transcendentalism purporting to account for the genetic meta-level conditions of possibility for the surfacing within historical time of modern subjectivity generally and the Kantian transcendental subject particularly (as itself a culminating epitome of modern

⁴³ Johnston (2005, pp. xxxii–xxxiii).

⁴⁴ Baas (1998, pp. 83–84).

⁴⁵ Baas (1998, p. 84).

⁴⁶ Baas (1998, p. 86).

⁴⁷ Johnston (2011a, 159–179, c, 2012c, 2013a, b, 2014), Johnston and Malabou (2013).

subjectivity). Whereas Kant's transcendentalism outlines a picture of the subject as a set of static first-order conditions of possibility (specifically for experience and the knowledge derived therefrom), Hegel's (meta-)transcendentalism delineates the ensemble of kinetic, temporally-extended second-order conditions of possibility for the appearance of Kantian transcendentalism's first-order conditions.

However, it might reasonably be inquired at this point: How is the Hegelian geneticization of Kantian transcendentalism not just, at base, a relatively straightforward historicism privileging historical time as an *aposteriori* bundle of empirical facts? There are many ways to answer this question, including ones relying upon reconstructions of Hegel's theses about history and/or interpretations of the place of what Hegel calls "logic" (*Logik*) in his philosophical system. I am not interested here in spelling out these sorts of responses, especially since they are easy to anticipate for anyone even casually familiar with this deservedly famous body of ideas. Instead, with an eye to bringing out into sharp relief under-appreciated dimensions of both Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis, I intend to draw mutually-illuminating (and unexpected) parallels between the former's *Naturphilosophie* and aspects of the latter's theory of the mirror stage (as dealt with earlier here).

On a number of prior occasions, I already have highlighted not only the neglected centrality of Lacan's depictions, scattered across the span of his texts from the 1930s until his death,⁴⁸ of "nature" as a not-all barred Real⁴⁹—more specifically, I also have emphasized the palpable presence of this theoretically crucial theme in his early, classical formulations apropos the mirror stage.⁵⁰ In his renowned 1949 *écrit*, Lacan, speaking of the human being, invokes "an organic inadequacy of his natural reality—assuming we can give some meaning to the word 'nature.'"⁵¹ To consider this "organic inadequacy" (i.e., prematurational helplessness) to be "natural" requires reconsidering nature *qua* harmonious substantial plenitude; it must be reconceived, at least in the case of the bio-material being of human beings, as a disharmonious substance shot through with absences, deficiencies, gaps, lags, and the like. Regarding the *imago* as brokering "a relationship between an organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*,"⁵² Lacan remarks:

In man, however, this relationship to nature is altered by a certain dehiscence at the very heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of malaise and motor uncoordination of the neonatal months. The objective notions of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal tracts and of certain

⁴⁸ Lacan (2001a, pp. 33–34, 2006a, pp. 77–78, 2006b, p. 92, 2006d, p. 286, 1953, p. 13, 2005a, p. 46, 1988b, p. 306, 1992, pp. 168–169, 2001b, p. 410, 2007a, p. 33, 2007b, p. 74, 1973–1974, May 21st, 1974, 2005b, p. 12, 1976–1977, May 17th, 1977).

⁴⁹ Johnston (2006, pp. 34–36, 2007, p. 14, 2008a, pp. 166–188, 2008b, pp. 270–273, 2011a, 159–179, c, 2012b, c, 2013a).

⁵⁰ Johnston (2005, pp. 205, 260–267, 2008b, pp. 46–48, 212–213, 224, 2011a, 159–179).

⁵¹ Lacan (2006a, p. 77).

⁵² Lacan (2006a, p. 78).

humoral residues of the maternal organism in the newborn confirm my view that we find in man a veritable *specific prematurity of birth*.⁵³

He immediately adds:

Let us note in passing that this fact is recognized as such by embryologists, under the heading ‘fetalization,’ as determining the superiority of the so-called higher centers of the central nervous system, and especially of the cerebral cortex which psychosurgical operations will lead us to regard as the intra-organic mirror.⁵⁴

In resonance with these quotations, Lacan, in “Some Reflections on the Ego,” even speculates that, “the cerebral cortex functions like a mirror”⁵⁵ (insofar as both infantile transitivity⁵⁶ and more general dynamics of identification between self and other[s] feature prominently in the Lacanian mirror stage, it’s a startlingly fortuitous coincidence that, in the mid-1990s, Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues discover what they serendipitously dub “mirror neurons”—inadvertently echoing the Lacan of “Some Reflections on the Ego,” a book co-authored by Rizzolatti with Corrado Sinigaglia is entitled *Mirrors in the Brain*⁵⁷). Lacan’s direct references to neurobiology in his 1949 *écrit*, as perhaps the most widely read of his writings, have been scotomized by virtually all of his readers up through today for a number of entwined historical and theoretical reasons.⁵⁸ In this instance, as in many others, the Lacanian dictum equating *connaissance* with *méconnaissance* appears to be apt.

The first of the two block quotations in the preceding paragraph mentions “a certain dehiscence at the very heart of the organism, a primordial Discord.” From very early on in his intellectual evolution, Lacan gestures toward a quasi-naturalism in which (human) nature, now understood differently than before (i.e., prior to Freudian psychoanalysis⁵⁹), is pervaded by antagonistic, maladaptive, dysfunction-inducing splits all the way down to the physical basis of its bodily existence. This line of thought is on display in the Lacanian *oeuvre* as early as 1938. In his Wallon-commissioned *Encyclopédie française* essay on “The Family Complexes,” Lacan discusses, among a wealth of topics, the initial conditions of possibility both enabling and catalyzing the young subject-to-be’s identificatory investment in the *Gestalt* forming the nucleus of the *moi* (i.e., the ego-grounding *imago qua a*). As with his later talk of “primordial Discord,” these possibility conditions are associated with “a twofold vital rupture” (*une double rupture vitale*).⁶⁰ This double dehiscence is specified as “rupture of that immediate adaptation to the milieu which

⁵³ Lacan (2006a, p. 78).

⁵⁴ Lacan (2006a, p. 78).

⁵⁵ Lacan (1953, p. 13).

⁵⁶ Lacan (2006a, p. 79, 1953, p. 16, 1988a, p. 169, 1993, pp. 39, 145, 1998, p. 357, 1961–1962, March 21st, 1962, 2004, p. 107).

⁵⁷ Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia (2008, pp. xi–xii, 106, 167–168).

⁵⁸ Johnston (2011a, 159–179, b, 141–182, 2014), Johnston and Malabou (2013).

⁵⁹ Johnston (2008a, pp. 170–173, 2011a, 159–179).

⁶⁰ Lacan (2001a, p. 41).

defines the world of the animal in its connaturality” (i.e., a dis/mal-adaptation to reality exempting humans from the dictates of evolutionary pressures otherwise riveting living beings to their here-and-now sensed surroundings) and “rupture of that unity of the functioning of the living being that enslaves perception to the drive (*pulsion*) in the animal”⁶¹ (although perceptual, cognitive, libidinal, emotional and motivational systems all have a basis in the “natural” anatomical and physiological constitution of the human being, these systems arguably are predestined by nature to become desynchronized and conflicted [i.e., “non-natural” if nature is construed as organically well-integrated] in humans in interesting, significant ways—a life-scientific basis for my Freud-and-Lacan-inspired theory of the “split drive” [*Trieb, pulsion*], as per *Time Driven*, is one of the things up for grabs here). Several pages subsequently, he goes on to designate all of this as “the vital insufficiency of man at his origins,”⁶² with the facticity of the neonate’s biological condition here being what is originary.

So, the libidinal center of gravity that is the ego-object as *a(ut*re), whose matheme, as seen earlier in connection with the thirteenth seminar, is *i(a)*, is established against “a background of organic disturbance and discord.”⁶³ What’s more, this ground-zero absence of organic harmony is a contingent material condition of possibility, as a necessary but not sufficient condition, for the eventual (although far from guaranteed *qua* predestined) ontogenetic emergence of the *moi* and its dialectical relations with subjectivity-beyond-the-ego (as per the mirror stage). Along related lines, Lacan, in a session of the second seminar appropriately entitled by Jacques-Alain Miller “A materialist definition of the phenomenon of consciousness,” puts forward the following:

The ego really is an object. The ego, which you allegedly perceive within the field of clear consciousness as being the unity of the latter, is precisely what the immediacy of sensation is in tension with. This unity isn’t at all homogenous with what happens at the surface of the field, which is neutral. Consciousness as a physical phenomenon is precisely what engenders this tension.⁶⁴

He continues:

The entire dialectic which I have given you as an example under the name of the *mirror stage* is based on the relation between, on the one hand, a certain level of tendencies which are experienced—let us say, for the moment, at a certain point in life—as disconnected, discordant, in pieces—and there’s always something of that that remains—and on the other hand, a unity with which it is merged and paired. It is in this unity that the subject for the first time knows himself as a unity, but as an alienated, virtual unity. It does not partake in the characteristics of inertia of the phenomenon of consciousness

⁶¹ Lacan (2001a, p. 41).

⁶² Lacan (2001a, p. 44).

⁶³ Lacan (1953, p. 15).

⁶⁴ Lacan (1988b, pp. 49–50).

under its primitive form, on the contrary, it has a vital, or anti-vital, relation with the subject.⁶⁵

Much of this recapitulates now-familiar features of the theory of the mirror stage: the ego as a congealed, reified objectification situated within the selfless (i.e., “neutral”) field of the perception-consciousness system, itself a function of the material organism (i.e., “a physical phenomenon”)⁶⁶; the yawning discrepancy (i.e., “tension”) between, on one side of the mirror, the phenomenology of the embodied and affective experience of the body-in-pieces (*corps morcelé*) in its biologically-determined prematurational *Hilflosigkeit* (i.e., “tendencies which are experienced... as disconnected, discordant, in pieces”), and, on the other side of the mirror, the unreachable (i.e., “there’s always something of that that remains”) donkey’s carrot of coordinated integrity as the elusive and illusory vanishing-point of coherent, unified wholeness reflected back to the consciousness of the gazing subject *à venir* as an infuriatingly impossible ideal⁶⁷; this ideal of one-ified selfhood, represented by the *imago-Gestalt*, as never-to-be-attained but nonetheless determinative of the subject’s desire thereafter until death⁶⁸ (in this vein, the hybrid Imaginary-Symbolic structures of ego-level identities, infused with the enigmatic desires of Real Others, are objects-causes of desire *à la* Lacan’s *objet petit a* as a Borromean knotting of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic⁶⁹). A brief perusal of the eighth, ninth, and seventeenth paragraphs of Lacan’s 1949 *écrit* on this topic confirms the obviousness of these connections between it and the above-quoted remarks from the second seminar.⁷⁰

But, what really intrigues me in the preceding quotations comes at the end of the second of the two: Lacan’s quick oscillation between “vital, or anti-vital” (*vital, ou contre-vital*).⁷¹ In tandem with other, recent pieces of my ongoing work,⁷² I want to maintain that this oscillation should be construed as signaling a Hegelian-style dialectical convergence of opposites, rather than as a moment of uncertain hesitation or a rapid change of mind on the fly in the classroom. Admittedly, Lacan, in this specific context, almost certainly is thinking of what he later elaborates persuasively at length around counter-intuitive psychoanalytic notions of the paradoxical comingling and interpenetration of life (i.e., vitality) and death (i.e., anti-vitality), a motif in his thought I’ve scrutinized elsewhere.⁷³ However, the profound link between Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis I wish to pinpoint and illuminate in this intervention hinges on the nature-culture rapport. The Lacan of the mirror stage indeed has his sights set on this; he stresses that the ontogenetic

⁶⁵ Lacan (1988b, p. 50).

⁶⁶ Lacan (1988b, pp. 44, 49).

⁶⁷ Lacan (1988b, p. 54).

⁶⁸ Lacan (1953, pp. 12–13, 15–16).

⁶⁹ Lacan (1971–1972, February 9th, 1972, 2005b, pp. 145–146, 148–150, 154–155, 1974).

⁷⁰ Lacan (2006a, pp. 76–78).

⁷¹ Lacan (1978, p. 66).

⁷² Johnston (2011a, 159–179, c, 2012c, 2014).

⁷³ Johnston (2008b, pp. 45–66, 2009, pp. 170–173).

processes resulting in ego-formation both take shape at the sensory-perceptual intersection of organic nature and socio-symbolic culture as well as come to mediate decisively between these domains throughout the ensuing life of the subject.⁷⁴ It would not be much of a stretch to hypothesize that the terms “vital” and “anti-vital” in *Seminar II* allude to nature and culture respectively in addition to life and death.

In “Some Reflections on the Ego,” Lacan posits the existence of a fissure/split pregnant with implications for psychical subjectivity. Therein, he states:

It is the gap separating man from nature that determines his lack of relationship to nature, and begets his narcissistic shield, with its nacreous covering on which is painted the world from which he is for ever cut off, but this same structure is also the sight where his own milieu is grafted onto him, i.e., the society of his fellow men.⁷⁵

The error to be avoided in exegetically unpacking this sentence is to interpret this “gap,” which also figures in the 1946 *écrit* “Presentation on Psychical Causality,”⁷⁶ as a mysterious non/super-natural force or factor, a dimension inexplicably above-and-beyond nature.⁷⁷ Expressed in Hegelian fashion, “the gap separating man from nature” is, in fact, a division internal to (humans’) nature itself, instead of being either a cultural imposition upon nature or an ineffable “x” belonging neither to nature nor culture. With reference to the crude, simplistic nature-nurture distinction (which the freshly-minted Dr. Lacan doesn’t refrain from helping himself to too⁷⁸), the nature of Lacanian “human nature” is naturally inclined toward the dominance of nurture over nature, that is, hard-wired/pre-programmed to be (socio-symbolically) re-wired/programmed (as per the preceding quotation, “his own milieu is grafted onto him, i.e., the society of his fellow men”—or, as per the canonical *Écrits*-version of the mirror stage, a socio-symbolically-mediated “gestalt may have formative effects on an organism”⁷⁹ for a denaturalization-destined human animal caught within “this intersection of nature and culture”⁸⁰). Such a radical reconceptualization of nature is integral to a transcendental theory of subjectivity—this would be a meta/ultra-transcendentalism in that it focuses on the possibility conditions for subjects rather than on subjects themselves as ensembles of always-already-in-place possibility conditions—that is nevertheless simultaneously genetic and materialist (by contrast with Kant’s static and idealist transcendentalism).⁸¹ One of this theory’s tasks is responsibly to integrate evidence from the life sciences into a dual philosophical and psychoanalytic explanatory framework bearing upon the emergent subject.

⁷⁴ Lacan (2006a, pp. 77–78, 80).

⁷⁵ Lacan (1953, p. 16).

⁷⁶ Lacan (2006c, p. 144), Johnston (2008b, pp. 282–284).

⁷⁷ Johnston (2012c).

⁷⁸ Lacan (1975, pp. 46, 52).

⁷⁹ Lacan (2006a, p. 77).

⁸⁰ Lacan (2006a, p. 80).

⁸¹ Johnston (2012a).

But, where is Hegel in this heterodox re-reading of Lacan? Gesturing in the direction of a project-in-process,⁸² I plan to advance an equally heterodox interpretation of Hegel's philosophy. To provide merely the sketchiest of previews, this re-interpretation begins from the claim that Hegelian absolute idealism, *contra* common (mis)understandings, isn't anti-materialist insofar as its systematic elaboration (as in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*) involves an objective-realist *Naturphilosophie* as an integral cornerstone of this system as a whole. Hegel, with his unique brand of "absolutism," repeatedly posits structural isomorphisms between subjectivity and objectivity; moreover, the spirituality of the former immanently/internally blossoms out of the naturalness of the latter (this being the bridge between the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Spirit* in the carefully-structured sequence of the *Encyclopedia*). Hence, although Hegel is categorically hostile to any and every variant of reductive materialism, he likely wouldn't harbor the same objections regarding my psychoanalytically-informed transcendental materialist theory of genetically-arising autonomous, denaturalized subjectivity (as a non-reductive account). In parallel with my assertions apropos Lacan in the prior paragraph, I likewise am convinced that, despite long-prevailing opinion to the contrary, the distinction between Nature (*Natur*) and Spirit (*Geist*), for Hegel, is a distinction internal to Nature itself (and not one internal to Spirit instead). Put differently, the non-natural history of *Geist* is itself the unfolding of a self-sundering, auto-denaturalizing *Natur*; the spiritual crises giving rise to new forms of mindedness and like-mindedness (such as those witnessed throughout the *Phenomenology*) are modified, sublimated repetitions of the *Ur*-crisis of nature's groundless ground out of which more-than-natural monstrosities (i.e., human subjects) surface and with which they rebelliously break. My main thesis is that this entire line of Hegelian heterodoxy (if not heresy) can be argued for rigorously and plausibly starting from an acknowledgment and appreciation of what Hegel is pointing at when speaking of the "weakness" or "impotence" (*Ohnmacht*) of nature.⁸³

With the preceding thumbnail sketch of a portrait of Hegel yet (but soon) to be painted, a heretofore unnoticed subterranean conjunction—this is a locus of intersection between, on the one hand, Hegel's philosophy of nature, and, on the other hand, Lacan's heavily-qualified appeals to nature and the natural sciences—easily can be brought to light. Lacan, in his 1955 *écrit* "Variations on the Standard Treatment," waves at "the dehiscence from natural harmony, required by Hegel to serve as the fruitful illness, life's happy fault, in which man, distinguishing himself from his essence, discovers his existence."⁸⁴ This Hegelian-Lacanian "dehiscence from natural harmony" manifestly on display in multiple guises at various moments in both thinkers' bodies of work, is something in nature more than nature itself. Such conflict, discord, and tension helps to make possible humanity's distinctive existence-over-essence (to underscore the reference to Jean-Paul Sartre in play

⁸² Johnston (2014).

⁸³ Hegel (1978, §250 [pp. 34–36], §368 [pp. 501–502, 510, 1970a, §250 [pp. 23–24], §370 [pp. 416, 423], 1970b, pp. 88–89, 106, 1956, pp. 65, 80), Johnston (2011a, 159–179, c, 2012c, 2014).

⁸⁴ Lacan (2006d, p. 286).

here), allowing for and pushing toward the coming-to-be of the ego-mediated subject-object dyad of Lacanian analysis (with the *moi qua a* serving to organize the desire-directing formations of fantasy [$\$ \diamond a$]). *Contra* Baas, who largely skips over Hegel in his reliance on Kant and Kant's phenomenological heirs, this combination of Hegel's objective-realist-*qua*-absolute-idealist philosophy of weak nature and Lacan's quasi-naturalism of a barred material Real (along with a background role for F.W.J. Schelling's genetic *Naturphilosophie*) altogether avoids any reliance whatsoever on the untenable subjective idealism shared between Kantian transcendentalism and post-Kantian phenomenology (with its anti-realist, anti-materialist, and anti-scientific tendencies) while simultaneously facilitating a much more precise and detailed *Aufhebung* of the opposition between the pure transcendental/*apriori* and the impure empirical/*aposteriori*. Circling back to the title of Lacan's thirteenth seminar and this seminar's treatment of *objet petit a* as glossed herein, I can say that one of my guiding agendas is to explore the invisible negativity behind the visible "object of psychoanalysis" with the resources furnished by a hybrid Hegelian-Lacanian materialism operative at the crossroads of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the sciences.

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