

Science, Language, and the “Truth of the Subject:” Lacan and Wittgenstein

Paul Livingston

Abstract: One aim of this paper is to consider, in a preliminary way, how something having the structure of a “subject of knowledge” may be seen as related to the overall structure of truth, in the context of an appreciation of the structure and being of language as essential to any possible articulation of it. By reviewing the different positions of Lacan and Wittgenstein with respect to the Cartesian *cogito*, I argue that, within such a context, neither the subject nor “its” position can be understood as having the substantial being of an entity, and it is equally impossible to grant it an ontological consistency correlative to the total realm of scientific objectivity set over against it as the whole of truth. Rather, in the context of the application of a formal consideration of the character of the signifier as it articulates the structures of the subject’s knowledge and truth, a subject of knowledge can only be characterized by reference to a constitutive inconsistency or splitting correlative to the incompleteness that henceforth marks the total field of scientific objectivity itself.

Keywords: Science, Language, Truth, Lacan, Wittgenstein

One aim of this paper is to consider, in a preliminary way, how one might understand any possible functioning of the category of the “subject” in relationship to that of truth, in a context shaped by the formal implications of the twentieth-century linguistic turn, both in its structuralist and analytic-philosophical variants. More specifically, I shall consider here the implications for the “position” of subjectivity of an appreciation of that aspect of the twentieth-century linguistic turn that adverts, in an ontologically realist way, to the structure and being of language as the essential support for any possible articulation of it. Within such a context, as I shall argue neither the subject nor “its” position can be understood as having the substantial being of an entity, and it is equally impossible to suppose for it an ontological consistency correlative to that of the total realm of scientific objectivity set over against it as the whole of the truth to which it has access. Furthermore, as I shall argue, one cannot adequately characterize the structural place of a subject of knowledge without understanding its linguistic support as operating in the formal mode of splitting or inconsistency that is implied by the incompleteness which henceforth marks the total field of scientific objectivity itself. Both this inconsistency on the side of the subject, and the incompleteness on the side of the world, here result from formal features of signification in relation to totality. As a consequence of these features, “the subject” correlative to the world as known disappears from its field, lacking any substantial support therein. In default of a

possible consistent knowledge of the whole, the position of the knowing subject in the world can only take the shape, as Lacan argues, of “some relationship of being that cannot be known”, or of what Wittgenstein calls its integration into the “given” of forms of life.

I
Near the beginning of his 1965 “Science and Truth,” Lacan opens a psychoanalytic discussion of the essential structure of what he does not hesitate to describe as a “subject” of science, correlative in its original articulation to the historical moment of science’s founding in the modern sense of Descartes and Galileo. Taking as his guideline Koyré’s thesis of a profound epistemological transformation, at this moment, in the position of the subject as thinker and knower of the world, Lacan describes this essential structure as witnessed in that of the Cartesian *cogito*, and in particular in the unequal relationships it uniquely establishes among knowledge, being, and truth:

I did not thus just make an immediate pronouncement concerning psychoanalysis’ vocation as a science. But it might have been noticed that I took my lead last year from a certain moment of the subject that I consider to be an essential correlate of science, a historically defined moment, the strict repeatability in experience of which perhaps remains to be determined: the moment Descartes inaugurates that goes by the name of *cogito*.

This correlate, as a moment, is the defile of a rejection of all knowledge, but is nevertheless claimed to establish for the subject a certain anchoring in being; I sustain that this anchoring constitutes the definition of the subject of science, “definition” to be understood in the sense of a narrow doorway.

This lead did not guide me in vain, for it led me at year end to formulate our experienced division as subjects as a division between knowledge and truth, and to accompany it with a topological model, the Möbius strip; this strip conveys the fact that the division in which these two terms come together is not to be derived from a difference in origin.¹

In establishing, in other words, the “I think” as the radical anchor of any possible knowledge of objectivity, Descartes passes necessarily through the “defile” of knowledge that consists in the exercise of global

.....
1 Lacan 1965, p. 856.

doubt, and hence the rejection of all knowledge that is not grounded in what he understands as the interiority and self-presence of the *ego cogito*. But in the passage from the “I think” to the “I am” that claims to secure the being of the subject and thus the truth of its ontological constituency, Descartes nevertheless establishes the subject’s capability to situate itself within the real that is then understood as the true cause of its ontological stability. This situation will then subsequently be one in which the subject thus defined, as Lacan argues, is essentially and constitutively “split”, caught up in a “constituting division” between knowledge and truth that henceforth defines both its structure and the field of possible scientific knowledge as objectivity that thereby opens up for it. This disequilibrium is such, Lacan argues, as subsequently to determine the being of the ego, in this sense, as one which radically grounds the totality of objective knowledge, but also essentially exempts itself from it; or, in other terms, as that which is essentially split between the founding function it maintains with respect to knowledge and the problematic structure of ontological self-founding that, in order to do so, it calls itself to perform.

Both the grounding function of the structure with respect to the totality of science’s field of knowledge and the problematic reflexivity that in turn founds this function then regularly operate, unmarked, at the basis of “modern” science to secure the functioning of its ordinary claims to know. But it is the attention psychoanalysis pays to the structural essentiality of *language* that, alone, suffices formally to reveal the actually antinomic nature of these sustaining relationships between truth and knowledge on the level of the ontological disequilibrium they introduce into the being of the knowing subject as such. Here, the structuralism of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss plays for Lacan the privileged role of allowing a “logical” elaboration of the dialectic of the constituting division that defines the subject, thereby allowing psychoanalysis to articulate structurally its essential and constituting relationship to its vanishing object, what Lacan famously signifies as the “object a.” This relationship – that of an “internal exclusion” in which the “object a must be inserted, as we already know, into the division of the subject by which the psychoanalytic field is quite specifically structured” – is, on Lacan’s telling, first revealed in a formally clear way by structuralist linguistics in its accounting for the constitutive place of the “subject who speaks.”² This speaking subject is – by distinction with the “subject of science” – here understood topologically and formally as constitutively within the “battery of signifiers” whose overall structure articulates the difference

.....
2 Lacan 1965, p. 863.

between the linguistic position of enunciation and what is enunciated from it, leading to a set of distinctive structural antinomies of the subject's position in relation to this total battery itself.

But it is, according to Lacan, not structural linguistics but rather contemporary logic that is best capable of formally articulating the structuring effects of the primacy of the signifier for the definition of the subject of science itself, through its demonstration of the essential antinomies involved in any assumption of the totalization of this subject's claim to know:

It is in the realm of logic that the theory's various refractive indices appear in relation to the subject of science....

It is logic that serves here as the subject's navel, logic insofar as it is in no way linked to the contingencies of a grammar. The formalization of grammar must literally circumvent this logic if it is to be successfully carried out, but the circumventing movement is inscribed in this very operation.

I will indicate further along how modern logic is situated ... It is indisputably the strictly determined consequence of an attempt to suture the subject of science, and Gödel's last theorem shows that the attempt fails there, meaning that the subject in question remains the correlate of science, but an antinomic correlate since science turns out to be defined by the deadlocked endeavor to suture the subject.³

If, in other words, it is an ambition of modern logic since Frege – up to and including the project of logical positivism – to ensure a formally adequate and methodologically transparent structural basis for the totality of possible knowledge of the real, then the limitative results that arise from its reflexive self-application bear confirming witness to the essentially antinomic structure of any position of knowing supposed to found itself on this basis. Lacan makes apparent reference, here, to Gödel's second incompleteness theorem, which shows the impossibility of proving, in any (actually consistent) formal system of sufficient strength to capture arithmetic, a statement of that system's own consistency. It thus proves impossible to secure the consistency of the methodologically formal *corpus* that is the basis for such a system's claim to articulate complete truth from within the field of demonstrated knowledge produced by that *corpus* itself.

More broadly, and as Lacan underscores elsewhere in discussing

.....
3 Lacan 1965, p. 861.

Gödel's theorems, the more general phenomenon of incompleteness to which both theorems bear witness can be seen as formally demonstrating that there is, inscribed in the structure of any formalism adequate to scientific knowledge, "some relationship of being that cannot be known."⁴ This relationship, which is, Lacan suggests, the sole concern of psychoanalysis in its investigation into the subjective support of the possibility of science, is witnessed in the fact that, as the first theorem can be seen as demonstrating, there is for every system some structurally articulated truth that can be recognized as such, but which it itself cannot demonstrate on the basis of its formal claim to know. In this respect, the essential incompleteness that Gödel's theorems demonstrate can also be seen as verifying the underlying disequilibrium between knowledge and truth that, then, essentially defines the position of any "subject" correlative to the totality of knowledge that the inscription of a logic offers to structure. If, then, Frege's attempts radically to exclude the individual subject of psychological experience from the objective field of knowledge (under the heading of his devastating arguments against psychologism) can also, as Lacan suggests, be seen as embodying the logicist or positivist project of a comprehensive "suture" of the formal subject of knowing to its field of possible knowledge, the result of this attempt is the return of this subject as structurally antinomic.⁵ Divided between knowledge and truth, it is thereby shown to lack any non-contradictory support in being, on the level of the logic of formal demonstration by means of which it would establish its own position there.

Returning, then, to the structure of the *cogito* as the substrate of any possible knowledge of the world, Lacan emphasizes the radical implications for it of the fact of its essential linguistic support. That the *cogito* must be inscribed in language means that the particular mode of unequal relationship between truth and knowledge that defines the being of the subject must be understood as essentially passing through the structure of its signification, and thus as well through the particular signification of the "ergo" or the "therefore" which here purports to ground being in thought. Familiarly, this "ergo" is not a matter of straightforward logical deduction or inference, since the necessity of the grounding connection to which it adverts does not, in general, survive

.....
4 Lacan 1973, p. 108.

5 As should be noted, it is problematic on both historical and conceptual grounds simply to identify, as Lacan sometimes does, Frege's logicism with the (much more empiricist) project of the "logical positivism" or "logical empiricism" of Schlick, Carnap, and Neurath, as well as to characterize either as formulating an ambition to ground the totality of (not only mathematical but also empirical) scientific knowledge in logic or formalism.

translation to the inferential relation of third-personal claims or truths.⁶ But if, as this implies, the first-personal and indexical form of the terms it connects proves essential to the establishment of the problematic relationship it adduces, it raises the formidable problem for the subject of the reflexive moment or operation by which, in thinking, the subject of the cogito purports to ground its own being as self-caused. This problem of the subject's reflexive assumption of itself is then not separable from the problem of the basis of the repetition in the "cogito, ergo sum" of the signifier "I" in the particular mode of (self-)grounding that, here, links its two instances:

Which is why it is worth restating that in the test of writing *I am thinking*: "therefore I am," with quotes around the second clause, it is legible that thought only grounds being by knotting itself in speech where every operation goes right to the essence of language.

While Heidegger gives us the expression "cogito sum" somewhere, serving his own purposes, it should be noted that he algebrizes the phrase, and we can justifiably highlight its remainder: "cogito ergo"; it is evident therein that nothing gets spoken without leaning on the cause.⁷

As Lacan emphasizes, the psychoanalytic interpretation of the structure of the cogito must accordingly consider the peculiar manner in which the *reflexivity* of the signifier "I" appears here to link thinking to being, invoking a grounding connection, signaled by the "ergo," which has no causal referent external to the relations of the signifiers themselves. On the other hand, it does not simply signal a straightforwardly *logical* deduction, as can be seen by reflecting on the modal features of the type of connection it is supposed to introduce. Somewhat notoriously, in introducing the *ego cogito* in the *Meditations*, Descartes never inscribes the "ergo," mentioning there only the necessary truth of the proposition "I am, I exist" [*ego sum, ego existo*] "every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind."⁸ Familiarly, though, if the claim of existence is here taken as having reference to an empirically constituted individual, the claim of existence cannot be taken as necessary in an objective and modal

.....
6 Thus, for instance, the purported inference (if such it is) from "I think" to "I am" does not survive translation, for example, to a fictional context: that Hamlet thinks does not imply that he exists. For this point as well as an illuminating discussion of the inferential or performative linguistic structure of Descartes' argument overall, see Hintikka 1962.

7 Lacan 1965, pp. 864-65.

8 Descartes 1641, p. 25.

sense, on pain of asserting the necessary existence of that individual.⁹ It is, rather, as Descartes may be read as suggesting, plausibly only the necessity of the reflexive "proposition" [*pronuntiatum*] *when it is uttered or conceived* that is here established. But this means that the claimed necessity of the conclusion of existence – the establishment of being that the cogito permits – passes essentially through the *activity* of its tokening in speech or (as Descartes supposes) in thought. But -- returning to the full formulation "ego cogito, ergo sum" (which Descartes does use, for instance in the *Principles of Philosophy* and (in French) in the *Discourse on the Method*) – this can only mean that the force of the "ergo" itself there depends essentially on the actual *existence* of the (token) reflexive signifiers that flank it.

It may be that, despite describing it as a "proposition," Descartes thinks of the "cogito, ergo sum" as, essentially, a kind of "inner" mental performance rather than anything requiring an explicit linguistic expression. If this is the case, though, the force of its purported demonstration does not generalize; even if it is possible for me to conclude, in my own interiority, from *my* thinking to *my* existence, it is not possible to draw from it any *general* conclusion about the being or nature of the subject. If, on the other hand, the demonstration of the *cogito* necessarily passes through the indexical linguistic signification that here articulates it means, this means that the support of the being that is to be established through or by the self-reflexive operation of thought can instead only amount to the quoted content of that thought itself, the "I am" together with its "therefore" as the signifier of a connective relationship actually missing in the real.

The point of this missing connection is that of the disequilibrium between knowledge and truth on which Lacan insists, the point at which, he goes on to argue, the "I" is thus called to establish itself in being. Taking up Freud's famous statement of the task of psychanalysis, "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden," Lacan offers, in order to point up the specific logic of the constitution of subjectivity he takes it to imply, the "retranslation" "Where it was, there must I come to be as a subject." In the context of the psychoanalyst's essential recognition of the fact of signification, the problem of the being of the ego *cogito* accordingly can be nothing other than the problem of the positional relationship, in language, of one indexical signifier to another, or of the basis for the self-identity induced or affirmed (but having no basis in external, referential fact) by this

.....
9 For discussion, see Kaplan 1989 and Braun 2017. In Kaplan's "logic of demonstratives," it is possible for a thinker to know *a priori* the proposition *she would express* (in a particular context) as "I exist". But the proposition *thereby expressed* is nevertheless contingent, since it asserts the existence of a particular (contingently existing) individual.

repetition on the level of the requirement it adduces:

Now this cause is what is covered (over) by the “soll Ich,” the “must I” of Freud’s formulation, which, in inverting its meaning [sens], brings forth the paradox of an imperative that presses me to assume [assumer] my own causality.¹⁰

In this respect, the psychoanalyst’s radical recourse to the being of language, and thus to the necessity that the relationship between thinking and being that announces itself in the cogito be *signified*, has the effect of posing the problem of the subject’s relation to knowledge as, alone, that of the kind of support it can gain from the interplay of signifiers in which it announces this relation.

What it means, then, that the *cogito* must be seen as “knotting itself in speech” is that the support of any possible knowledge that it grounds must be understood structurally, as having its proper unity (if anywhere) only in and through the effects of signifiers as such. These effects are moreover, as Lacan notes, to be separated radically and in the first instance from any assumption of their substantial reference, or the existent being of what is signified. For psychoanalysis, rather, the signifier is “defined ... as acting first of all as if it were separate from its signification,” and it is only in the interplay between signifiers thus conceived that they have what can be characterized as their “meaning effects.”¹¹ This conception of the primacy of the signifier with respect to any assumed referential being of what is signified, is the basis for Lacan’s most typical articulation of the only meaning that the psychoanalytic reference to the “subject” can then have: that of what is “conveyed by a signifier in relation to another signifier.”¹² Here, in other words, the “subject” is neither a substantial being nor a privileged realm of interiority, but rather “nothing other than what slides in a chain of signifiers, whether he knows which signifier he is the effect of or not.”¹³

Nevertheless, the lack of positive ontological consistency that therefore characterizes any possible reference, in analytic discourse, for the *singulare tantum* “the subject” does not lead Lacan to reject the term’s use there. Rather, it is from this position that Lacan articulates, for example in seminar XX, the distinctive way in which the “verbal

10 Lacan 1965, p. 865.

11 Lacan 1965, p. 875.

12 Lacan 1965, p. 875.

13 Lacan 1973, p. 50.

fiction” that is the referent of the “subject” comes to subsist, in default of a metalanguage, or “language of being” that would assure for it a secure place from which to anchor the totality of its knowledge of the real:

I am going to say – that is my function – I am going to say once again – because I repeat myself – something that I say (*ce qui est de mon dire*), which is enunciated as follows, “There’s no such thing as a metalanguage.”

When I say that, it apparently means – no language of being. But is there being? As I pointed out last time, what I say is what there isn’t. Being is, as they say, and nonbeing is not. There is or there isn’t. Being is merely presumed in certain words – ‘individual,’ for instance, and ‘substance.’ In my view, it is but a fact of what is said (*un fait de dit*).

The word ‘subject’ that I use thus takes on a different import. I distinguish myself from the language of being. That implies that there may be verbal fiction (*fiction de mot*) – I mean, fiction on the basis of the word ...

This is where I arrive at the meaning of the word ‘subject’ in analytic discourse. What speaks without knowing it makes me ‘I,’ subject of the verb. That doesn’t suffice to bring me into being. That has nothing to do with what I am forced to put in being (*mettre dans l’être*) – enough knowledge for it to hold up, but not one drop more ...

The ‘I’ is not a being, but rather something attributed to [or presumed in] that which speaks.¹⁴

In default of any substantial or individual being of its own, the “I” here takes on the significance of that which is presupposed or attributed as the positional support in language of the being that speaks. This does not suffice, as Lacan emphasizes, to establish any stable anchoring of this being in the real, from which it could formulate a position of the secure grounding of knowledge. But it does show how its peculiar mode of subsistence – that of “what speaks without knowing it” – comes to insert itself in the essential gap between being and knowledge that thereby opens up.

14 Lacan 1973, pp. 118-120.

II

In his 2002 article “Russell, Wittgenstein, and *cogito, ergo sum*,” Antony Flew relates the telling anecdote of Wittgenstein’s scheduled response, at a 1947 meeting of the Jowett society in Oxford, to a paper by Oscar Wood on the topic:

I cannot now recall what if anything Wittgenstein said in the response that he was scheduled to make to Oscar Wood’s paper on “*Cogito ergo sum*,” except that any remarks he did make at that stage certainly contained no reference whatever to that paper. Understandably exasperated by Wittgenstein’s failure to address what had been widely publicized as the topic of the meeting, Professor H.A. ... Prichard – as his and the first contribution to the ensuing discussion – wanted to know what “Herr Wittgenstein” had to say about *Cogito ergo sum*. Wittgenstein’s response was to say, “*Cogito ergo sum*. That’s a very peculiar sentence,” pointing to his own head as he uttered the two words “cogito” and “sum.”¹⁵

Flew takes Wittgenstein’s gesture to formulate a materialist objection to Descartes’ dualism, operating by reminding the audience of the (purportedly undoubted) physicality of the referent of the first-person pronoun in intersubjective discourse:

At the time this seemed to me, as it clearly seemed to Prichard, to be nothing more than a perverse but no doubt entirely characteristic way of refusing to meet Prichard’s modestly reasonable request for relevant comment. It was only later that I realized that, by thus reminding his audience that the referents of the token-reflexive word “I” are the flesh and blood people who utter it to refer to themselves, Wittgenstein might have been suggesting a radical and totally devastating objection to the position that Descartes had reached in the second paragraph of Part IV of his *Discourse on the Method*. For it is simply false to maintain that the referent of the word is an incorporeal and yet substantial subject of consciousness. It is, on the contrary, a flesh and blood human being.¹⁶

In the paragraph of the *Discourse* mentioned by Flew, Descartes concludes from the fact that he thinks, in doubting, that he is a “substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think” and,

15 Flew 2002, p. 66.

16 Flew 2002, pp. 66-67.

thereby, to the further conclusion of the complete distinction of “this ‘I’ – that is, the soul by which I am what I am” from the body.¹⁷ Against this, as Flew suggests, Wittgenstein’s gesture on the occasion may be seen as exposing what amounts, in Descartes’ text, to the unargued reification of a substantial nominal referent for what rather functions, in public discourse, as the first-person reflexive pronoun. Whereas Descartes thereby purports to find in the activity of thinking the substantial support of the identity of the subject as thinking soul, attention to the actual linguistic functioning of the token-reflexive “I” then has, by contrast, the effect of reminding us that its ordinary use is to point to “the flesh and blood people who utter it” and, further, that there can be, in this ordinary use, no question of its picking out a hidden thinking substance.

On this interpretation, Wittgenstein’s gesture has the significant merit of evincing the essential connection of the functioning of indexical self-reference, in ordinary intersubjective discourse, to the spatiotemporal location -- and hence the materiality -- of its objects. However, we move closer to an illuminating interpretation of the way Wittgenstein’s gesture might be thought to indicate positively as well something of the relationship of being and knowledge that this implies by adding to it the relevant consideration that Flew’s “flesh and blood people” are – whatever the consequences of the materiality of their embodiment – also, and essentially, beings that *speak*. As such they find themselves, if anywhere, only in the *nexus* of the signifier. It is here they must find any support they derive for their being as knowers. As such they are themselves essentially subject, in particular, to what Lacan understands as the materiality of the signifier, from which they must then derive whatever support they may find, in thinking, for their being as knowers. Of course, it is only as beings that speak that they are capable of “self”-reference, or of “token-reflexive” self-signification at all. Wittgenstein’s repetition of the indexical “I” together with the gesture of self-indication then does not simply have the significance of reminding the audience of a fact about the materiality of the ordinary referents of this expression, but rather, and more radically, of the specific kind of sustenance that the apparent substantiality of this reference derives from its constitutive relationship to language itself, wherein speaking beings come to exist as such.

In fact, here Wittgenstein stages, quite literally, the only kind of subsistence that “the subject” may reasonably be understood to have, as existing in the sliding between pure signifiers, separated entirely from any assumption of signification, which Lacan suggests. If it is evident,

17 Descartes 1637, pp. 32-33.

from Wittgenstein's gesture, that the referent of the indexical is not some immaterial or otherwise interior entity, it is equally evident that the repetition of the reflexive gesture here does not establish anything but its own repeatability: that of the (presumed or presupposed) identity over time of the position from which self-reference takes place. But, just as clearly, the connection that is purported or assumed to exist in the "ergo" of the *cogito ergo sum*, thereby grounding this identity as privileged point of knowledge, is lacking in the real: between the reflexive performance and the point of being that it is supposed to ground there is no real connection, no substantial underlying unity or identity beyond that assumed by the positional attribution of the "I" itself.

That this support is not sufficiently established simply by affirming or stipulating the materiality of any referent of "I" in intersubjective discourse is further shown by the consideration that indexical or demonstrative reference to an ordinary material object, even if repeated, does not even have the appearance of establishing a point in reality from which truths can be known.¹⁸ Seen, rather, not simply as the assertion of a presumptive materialism but rather as calling attention to the essentiality of the support for a possible knowing that the subject draws from language, the effect of Wittgenstein's repetition of the "I", along with the reflexive gesture of self-demonstration, can rather be seen as that of illuminating how the being that speaks must find in language the cause of its being, as well as how it thereby essentially misses there any substantial being of this sought cause.

Seen in this way, what is most decisive about Wittgenstein's gesture is not that the reflexive "I" can be repeated over time, in each case having a referent which is in fact a unitary spatiotemporally located one. It is rather that the substantial unity which here appears to underlie the identity of the reference across the two cases is nowhere itself to be found as an object of indexical (or any other kind of) reference; it is this absent cause of being which is rather expressed here by the "ergo," which itself lacks any demonstrative or indexical correlate. But if, in the "cogito, ergo sum," the "ergo" thus lacks the reference of any substantial or connective being that would act as support for the unity of the subject thus announced, then the positive structure of the *ego cogito* must, rather, be thought as supported essentially, and only, by the gap between the two repetitions of the linguistic "I" themselves. As Wittgenstein's gesture points up, these two instances have the effect of adverting to a movement proposed to be made from the self-reference of thought to that of being;

.....
18 Thus, in general, the inference from "this φ's" to "this exists" may be taken as valid, at least when both tokenings of "this" are accompanied by a demonstrative gesture toward the same individual; but the inference does not in general even appear to establish anything about knowledge.

but what corresponds to each in reality can only be the empty form of linguistic self-reference itself.

What kind of position for a "subject," is, then, thus sustained in language for the being that speaks? At *PI* 306, Wittgenstein responds to the interlocutor's charge of the eliminativist behaviorism that may seem to be implicated by his questioning about the being of inner and mental "processes" with a carefully measured dialectical formulation indicating, as well, the positive linguistic locus of the position from which this being is sustained:

"Aren't you nevertheless a behaviourist in disguise? Aren't you nevertheless basically saying that everything except human behavior is a fiction?" -- If I speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction.

Here, studiously avoiding any reference to a "subject" or its being, Wittgenstein nevertheless indicates, in terms that directly evoke Lacan's own reference to "linguistic fictions," the kind of support that the referent of the "I" may reasonably be thought to derive from the being of language which is its source. This is not, as we have seen, the support of substance, nor even of the unity of what we can thereby take to be an entity enduring over time. It is, rather, the suppositional or presumptive being of that which has, in its articulation, the structure of a *linguistic* or *grammatical* fiction: that which comes to subsist on the basis of its assumption in language at the structural point where it – language itself -- necessarily invokes the fantasy of the total support of its own global position of knowing. The staging of this imaginary support as that of the interiority of a domain of the "private" then articulates it as that of the indefeasible truth of the being of the subjective, of the immediacy or privileged self-presence of "inner" contents and experiences that cannot be doubted because of the priority with which they are known.

Without according to this interiority any status other than a fictional one, how can we better understand its structure? It is in response to this question that we might usefully understand the later Wittgenstein's carefully dialectical response to the position that finds in a purported indefeasibly certain self-knowledge the essential support of the "privacy" of the subjective:

246. In what sense are my sensations *private*? -- Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it. – In one way this is false, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word "know" as it is normally used (and how else are we

to use it?), then other people very often know if I'm in pain. –Yes, but all the same, not with the certainty with which I know it myself! – It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I'm in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behavior – for I cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.

This much is true: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself.¹⁹

Here, the interlocutory voice that aims to establish the being of the subject as the specialized “private” domain of its knowledge yields to the linguistic or grammatical reminder of the sense of knowledge itself, in its defining relation to the possibilities of its articulation and contestation. The effect of the reminder is to maintain, what is surely correct, that there is no signification of the subject's interiority to establish the truth of its being that does not also expose it to the possible contestation of that truth as expressed, at least if it does more than just to affirm the empty “I am”. This is not to say that Wittgenstein denies the force or validity of the particular operation by which Descartes himself articulates what he takes as the positive basis of this securing, namely the consideration of the asymmetry of the possibility of doubt between the positions from which I make reference to another and to myself. But the effect of the remark is to show how such a subject can only maintain this self-reference in the default of the substantiality of the positive self-knowing supposed, by Descartes, to be established thereby.

In particular, the effects for the constitution of the position of the being presumed to know of what may be described in Lacanian terms as its constitutive subjection to the signifier are staged radically when, developing the skein of considerations in the *Philosophical Investigations* typically termed the “Private Language Argument,” Wittgenstein considers the case of a diarist who wishes to chronicle the recurrence of a certain sensation:

To this end I associate it with the sign “S” and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.²⁰

In the dialogue that ensues, the claims of the interlocutor to establish an identical referent for the “S” in the repetition of its inscription are

19 Wittgenstein 1951, section 246.

20 Wittgenstein 1951, section 258.

repeatedly and effectively challenged by Wittgenstein's posing of the problem of the sustenance of the relationship in which the reference of the sign to its identical object is supposed to consist. First, evidently, “a definition of the sign cannot be formulated:” it is clearly impossible, in other words, to present the sign along with its referent on the unitary plane of reference that its linguistic definition would require, given that the referent is here conceived as “private” and essentially “inner”.²¹ Next, the interlocutor proposes that one might be able nevertheless to give a “kind” of ostensive definition of the sign to oneself, not by means of pointing in the ordinary sense but by means of the “inward” pointing achieved by a direction of one's attention to the sensation. However, it is obscure, as Wittgenstein points out, what this direction of attention suffices to achieve: if its point is to “fix” or “lay down” the meaning of the sign, the interlocutor can only suppose that it does so by allowing the connection between the sign and the sensation to be “committed to memory.” But:

...“I commit it to memory” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *correctly* in the future. But in the present case, I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means we can't talk about ‘correct’.²²

Again, at *PI* 260, the interlocutor insists, appealing once more to the force of her own conviction as felt: “Well, I *believe* that this is the sensation S again.” The deflationary response comes swiftly: “Perhaps you *believe* that you believe it!” Here, beyond the obvious and immediate force of the riposte to the interlocutor who, having staked her position on the assuredness of the justified truth of the subjective, is constrained to retreat to mere belief, Wittgenstein also invokes the essentially quotational structure of the contents of thought itself: whether it is a matter of knowledge *or* belief, the subjective self-relation sought in what is supposed to be self-evidently the same can only be expressed as one's regular connection to the propositional *content*: “THIS is the sensation S again.”²³ However, besides involving essentially the indexical “this,” whose “inner” functioning is of course far from assured, the quotational

21 Wittgenstein 1951, section 258.

22 Wittgenstein 1951, section 258.

23 Cf. *PI* 263: “Surely I can (inwardly) resolve to call THIS ‘pain’ in the future.” – “But is it certain that you have resolved this? Are you sure that it was enough for this purpose to concentrate your attention on your feeling?” – An odd question. –

form itself *requires* the stable reference of the name “S” across instances of it use, and thus can by no means be thought to *establish* it. Thus the interlocutor’s claim to *establish* the stable basis for the repetition of the “S” in the “inner” place of the subject’s truth is exposed as idle. The signifier’s possibility of repetition is not enough to establish an identical being; nor does it even appear, once exposed to the necessary form of its linguistic quotation, to produce the self-presentational indefeasibility that the “Cartesian” position claims for its reference. On the other hand, though, what – and here is to be found the proper being of the “grammatical fiction” of interiority that it sustains – the possibility of the repetition of the signifier *does* indicate is the proper place of the reference made to “sensations” in the regular course of the life of the being that speaks. This is not the place accorded to it by the (would-be) “private” diarist, which is rather that of the mere noting of the presumed presence of an item supposed to recur in a privileged domain. But it is nevertheless the presuppositional or suppositional place from which we maintain and articulate, as beings that think, speak, and feel, the claims of our desires and the expressions of our wishes, thoughts, and pains.

With this observation, we are in a position to understand that, instead of (as is usually thought) here rejecting the being of sensations and of the “inner,” on the verificationist or criteriological grounds of a presumptive assumption of the essential “publicity” of language, Wittgenstein is, rather, formulating the radical implication of their essential subjection to the form of the signifier itself, from which, alone, they gain their sustenance in being. Of course, this has the implication that the subject’s thinking alone, and the operations of which it is capable, do not suffice to establish a point for itself in being, and still less its own identity over time. Instead, the sustenance of this presumed or maintained identity must be found, if anywhere, in the very materiality of the signifier and its own evident capacity to be repeated as the same. This is not the “truth” of the subject in the sense of establishing for “it” a cause of its being, unless this being be nothing other than that of the repeatability of language itself, or the “meaning effect” of the diachronic relation of two temporally distinct indexical tokens of self-reference in ordinary discourse. It is, however, nevertheless the essential support of the kind of ‘inner life’ that a being who speaks can have, and of the kind of self-knowledge of which it is capable.

III

In his Seminar XVII of 1969-70, in the midst of a discussion of the relationship of truth and *jouissance*, Lacan affirms that, for the analyst’s investigation of it, “truth” cannot have any meaning other than that which it attains in propositional logic, where it is treated in particular simply as one of the two truth-values, and its handling is reduced to the marking of certain propositions with its mark (typically the symbol ‘T’). “This usage,” Lacan says, “is most particularly bereft of hope,” but this hopelessness is also, he suggests, exactly “what is salubrious about it.”²⁴ It is in illustration of the radical consequences of this treatment that he then refers to Wittgenstein as:

...the author who has given the most forceful formulation to what results from the enterprise of proposing that the only truth there is is inscribed in a proposition, and from articulating that which, in knowledge as such – knowledge being constituted on the basis of propositions – can in all strictness function as truth.²⁵

In the proposal, with which Lacan certainly agrees, he finds, in particular, the adequate formulation of the strict constraint which he (Lacan) elsewhere puts on the kind of structural knowledge of which the analyst’s discourse is, alone, capable: that which can be captured by means of symbolic and mathematical formalization, emerging at the demonstrative point of the necessary impasse of its ambition consistently to capture the whole.²⁶ For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as Lacan reads him, in particular, “nothing can be said to be true other than agreement with a structure which I will not even situate ... as logical, but, and [Wittgenstein] puts this well, as grammatical.”²⁷ In the *Tractatus*, the truth of propositions – here, the only truth that there is – is structured grammatically in accordance with the logical/grammatical form of the world, and the world, understood as “all that is the case”, is itself just the correlate of a composite proposition comprising the totality

24 Lacan 1970, p. 62.

25 Lacan 1970, p. 66.

26 E.g.: “The real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization. That is why I thought I could provide a model of it using mathematical formalization, inasmuch as it is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signifierness. The mathematical formalization of signifierness runs counter to meaning – I almost said “à *contre-sens*.” (Lacan 1973, pp. 85-86).

27 Lacan 1970, p. 66.

of propositional truths.²⁸ All that can then be said about this structure, as Lacan notes, is tautologous, having the empty form of, for example, the assertion that “whatever you state is either true or false.”²⁹ In this respect, as Wittgenstein concludes at the end of the book, everything that can be said of grammatical structure, the form of the world, is strictly speaking nonsense [*Unsinn*], and the “long circuit” of the *Tractatus*’ own statements will only, if successful, have the effect of allowing the reader to conclude that that, everything having been said about the structure of truth, there is nothing further to say; but also that all that has been said *about* the structure of truth itself lacks sense.³⁰

Furthermore, if there is no truth but the truth of propositions, one cannot suppose alongside this truth another stratum or variety of truth caused or induced by the *existence* of anything whatsoever: no *object* or entity, whether in its presence or in its appearance, can by itself ground the saying of any truth. This is, as Lacan notes, sufficiently established in the context of the *Tractatus* by the claim of proposition 4.21: that “The simplest kind of proposition, an elementary proposition, asserts the existence of a state of affairs.”³¹ Given, in particular, that the world is, for Wittgenstein, entirely structured and supported as the complex structure of states of affairs which are themselves understood as simple objects in direct combination, this implies that there are no things in the world “but that are inaccessible”: no things that can be described, named or otherwise articulated, except insofar as they are supported by the logical-grammatical structure of the proposition itself.³²

In particular, as Wittgenstein states at 3.221:

Objects can only be *named*. Signs are their representatives. I can only speak *about* them: I cannot *put them into words* [*sie aussprechen kann ich nicht*]. Propositions can only say *how* things are, not *what* they are.

As Lacan suggests in concluding the discussion of Wittgenstein in seminar XVII, that there is only propositional truth, and that there accordingly no truth of objects alone, has the further consequence that there is no cause of truth outside what is captured in deductive

28 Wittgenstein 1921 (henceforth: *TLP*), 1-1.12.

29 Lacan 1970, p. 67.

30 Lacan 1970, p. 67; *TLP* 6.53-7.

31 Lacan 1970, p. 67; *TLP* 4.21.

32 Lacan 1970, p. 68.

implication as its inferential preservation:

There is no more certain light under which what results from what logicians have always articulated appears, if only to dazzle us with the air of paradox contained in what has been called material implication... if...we reject that the true entail the false, that it can have a false consequent – for this is what we are rejecting, in the absence of which there would be no possible articulation of propositional logic – we end up with this curious fact that the true has a genealogy, that it always goes back to an initial true, from which it is no longer able to fall.

This is such a strange indication, one that is so challenged by our entire life, I mean our life as a subject, that this alone would be sufficient to question whether truth could in any way be isolated as an attribute – as an attribute of anything capable of articulating with knowledge.³³

If one agrees, as Lacan does on behalf of the analyst’s discourse, with Wittgenstein’s constraint of truth to the propositional, one can only draw the conclusion that its articulation is itself wholly structured by the deductive relationships of propositions. Once the initial, elementary propositions are fixed, there can be truth only as the inferential deduction of further propositions from these. There can, then, be no *object* that is the cause of truth, and it accordingly becomes at least doubtful whether there can be anything like a *subject* whose positive knowledge is marked by any distinctive relation to it.

Indeed, if truth can only be propositional, where does this leave the supposition of a “subject of knowledge” itself? At 5.541-5.5421, Wittgenstein considers the logical form of propositions including verbs of intentionality, including “certain forms of proposition in psychology, such as ‘A believes that p is the case’ and ‘A has the thought p’”, etc. Propositions of these forms, as Wittgenstein notes, have on their face the peculiarity of appearing to relate what is grammatically an object – the bearer of the name ‘A’ – to an embedded proposition, thereby seeming to allow the latter to figure in the former in a non-truth-functional way. However, owing to the logical independence of simple propositions, which itself has its basis in the insistence of 4.21 that the simplest truth-evaluable propositions are those asserting the existence of states of affairs (rather than objects), it is impossible for a proposition to appear

33 Lacan 1970, p. 69.

significantly in another one, unless they are connected truth-functionally.³⁴

This leads Wittgenstein to conclude that the superficial form of (e.g.) ‘A believes that *p*’, ‘A has the thought *p*’, and ‘A says *p*’ is here misleading: propositions appearing to exhibit this form, and indeed propositions involving what Russell misleadingly called “propositional attitudes” generally, are in fact of the merely disquotational form “‘*p*’ says *p*’. This form does not involve the correlation of a fact with an object, but rather only “the correlation of facts by means of the correlation of their objects:” in particular, the apparent form of relation of a subject to a proposition is here replaced with the correlation of two facts with as shared logical form which results from the representational relationship of the individual signs of the first with the objects of the second.³⁵ Given the *Tractatus*’ constraint of truth to the nexus of the proposition, it is in this primitive correlative relationship that, alone, the “objective” cause of the truth of propositions can consist. But the least that can be said about this primitive relationship between names and their objects is that, given the radical distinction between names and propositions, there can be no truth of it, and certainly none that a subject can establish and maintain.

Indeed, from this Wittgenstein draws the general and striking conclusions that:

5.5421. This shows too that there is no such thing as the soul – the subject, etc. – as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day.

and

5.631 There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.

Given the *Tractatus*’ limitation of truth to the propositional and the structuralist form of inference to which it thereby constrains it, there is, then, nowhere in the world a “subject of knowledge”: nowhere in the world, that is, a subject who stands in such a relation to truth in general as to be able to locate itself with respect to it, or to find anywhere within it the privileged point of its own being as knower. But if the propositional

34 TLP 5.54.

35 TLP 5.542. As, for instance, if, rather than ascribing to *A* the belief that “the cat is on the mat,” one imagines a token of the sentence “the cat is on the mat” literally inscribed in *A*’s brain: the tokening is itself a fact (TLP 2.141; 3.143-3.1432) composed of individual objects – its terms – some of which are in representational relationships to the objects which comprise the fact of the cat’s actually being on the mat.

structure of truth thus suffices to establish the non-existence of a subjective cause or bearer of knowledge in the world, for the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* there is, nevertheless, left over as a kind of *residuum* the “metaphysical” subject: although nowhere to be found in the world, it is nevertheless correlative with the world as a whole and as such, and identified with its limit.³⁶ The claim that there is such a subject is motivated, in the *Tractatus*, by the “truth of solipsism” that one might attempt to express as the reflexive claim that “the world is *my* world”: but as Wittgenstein notes, the attempt to express this “truth” immediately miscarries, victim to the avowed nonsensicality of *all* propositions beyond those asserting empirical truths.³⁷ If this “metaphysical” subject is construed, in default of an objective position of knowledge *within* the world, as nevertheless possessing a point of knowledge, grounded in the correlation between signs and objects that establishes the possibility of language in the real, this point is nevertheless radically inexpressible. And if it can be said that it founds the correlation of signs to their (simple) objects it does so from a mystical position that itself cannot be founded in the real, on pain of declaring it contradictory.

Here, we apparently then return to Lacan’s antinomic subject of the signifier, formally correlative not to the totality of the world but to the gap between knowledge and truth that emerges from its necessary incompleteness. The grammatical structure here remains such as to exclude any possible non-contradictory “truth of the subject” as cause of its being. If, in other words, the early Wittgenstein will have drawn the radical consequences for a “subject position” of the propositional form of knowledge of the whole, he will have done so only at the significant cost of the invocation of an undefinable and unsayable point of contact in the real. Given the *Tractatus*’ recognition of the grammatical structure of the world, the “position” of the subject is then that of, as Lacan says, “some relation of being that cannot be known” or even spoken of. But this does not mean, as Lacan himself suggests, that the only possible response to this recognition is the austere silence that the *Tractatus* famously concludes by recommending or prescribing. At any rate, as he suggests in distinguishing the discourse of the analyst from what he calls the “psychotic ferocity” of the early Wittgenstein’s own discourse, it may be possible to recognize the inseparability of truth from the effects of language while nevertheless affirming, as Lacan constantly does, some possibility of the articulation, outside all propositions, of that unknown relation which places the being that speaks in the *locus*

36 TLP 5.632, 5.633.

37 TLP 5.62.

of the (incomplete) totality of language itself.³⁸ That this totality must be incomplete means that this relation cannot correspond to that of a subject to its objects within the world, and that any stability it might be thought to have is instead revealed as the mirage of its necessary misrecognition of itself there. But if there is, on the other hand, a way of articulating this obscure relation to being, in default of knowledge, it can then itself apparently have no form but that of our relation to the paradoxical ground that the later Wittgenstein himself appears to gesture toward when he invokes, cautiously and without positive definition, what he calls the “given” of the structure of our language, as we find ourselves in our own imagination of it, our “form of life.”³⁹ It must be admitted that, while this indication notably parallels Lacan’s own in invoking the value of “form” at the point of the figuration of the absent cause of the subject’s linguistic being, the suggestion of parallelism is not verified by any obvious correspondence of the demonstrative or theoretical methods called upon to verify its functioning there in each case. Nevertheless, if the connection is instead situated at the level of the shared therapeutic ambition that crucially motivates both projects’ engagements with the life of the being that speaks, it may be possible to glimpse in them the outlines of a common positive figure of a linguistic life reconciled to the movement of desire that the vanishing of this cause implies.

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E
/
Volume 5 /
Issue 1

Bibliography
 Braun, David 2017, "Indexicals", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/indexicals/>>.
 Descartes, René 1637, *Discourse on The Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences*. Translated by Robert Stoothoff. In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1985.
 ---- 1641, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. In *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Fourth Edition. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.
 Flew, Antony 2002, 'Russell, Wittgenstein, and *Cogito ergo sum*,' in *Bertrand Russell on Nuclear War, Peace, and Language: Critical and Historical Essays*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
 Hintikka, J. 1962, 'Cogito Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?' *The Philosophical Review* 71:1 (Jan. 1962), 3-32.
 Kaplan, David, 1989, 'Demonstratives,' Almog, J., Perry, J. and Wettstein, H., 1989. *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 481–563.
 Lacan, Jacques 1965, 'Science and Truth', in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006.
 ---- 1970, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*. Translated by Russell Grigg. New York: Norton, 2007.
 ---- 1973, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*. Translated with notes by Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 1998.
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1921, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 1988.
 ---- 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*. German text with English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Revised 4th edition. Blackwell, 2009.

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E
/
Volume 5 /
Issue 1

.....
 38 "As for the analytic operation, it is distinguished by advancing into this field in a way that is distinct from what is, I would say, found embodied in Wittgenstein's discourse, that is, a psychotic ferocity, in comparison with which Ockham's well-known razor, which states that we must admit only notions that are necessary, is nothing ...
 Truth – we begin again from first principles – is certainly inseparable from the effects of language taken as such.
 No truth can be localized except in the field in which it is stated – in which it is stated as best it can. Therefore, it is true that there is no true without the false, at least not in principle. This is true. But that there is no false without the true, that is false.
 I mean that the true can only be found outside all propositions. To say that the true is inseparable from the effects of language, considered as such, is to include the unconscious within them." (Lacan 1970, p. 70)

39 "What has to be accepted, the given, is – one might say – *forms of life*." (Wittgenstein 1951, p. 238) "...And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." (Wittgenstein 1951, sect. 19).