An Introduction to the Ideas of Jacques Lacan

Introduction

The French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) started his exploration of the human mind because during his work he discovered that there were certain cases that could not be explained somatically. In order to understand psychiatrist patients, it was not enough to understand the human body, but also the condition in general. As that other doctor, Freud, had encountered the same problems, Lacan decided to reread Freud attentively. Especially the later studies caught his attention. In these studies the analyst's focus shifted from a search of 'a real truth' to conceptions of a complex and multilayered idea of truth, in which the linguistic representation prevailed over a reality beyond language that is gone forever, lost to both speaker and listener. Gradually, Lacan then developed his notions of the Symbolic order, the Imaginary Order, and the Real. He called this enterprise a 'Retour à Freud'. This differs from the manifold interpretations of Freud some later psychoanalysts, such as the egopsychologists, have given. Lacan is also indebted to structuralism, but he adds some striking changes to the theory. We can say that he looked at Freud through structuralist glasses, which resulted in a unique theory, with as building stones the three Orders mentioned above. The central idea is that man is a cultural being, and that this culture is in essence symbolic. The co-ordinates if man's life are symbols, are lingual, not the things language refers to.

Some notes on Structuralism

I will now explain the basic ideas and presuppositions of structuralism insofar as they are relevant to understand Lacan. From the nineteenth century onwards, linguistics became increasingly important. With De Saussure and his structuralism a whole new paradigm in the science of language had been born. But the notion of structure became, under the influence of linguistics, also increasingly important in other branches, like anthropology. Lacan is influenced by this as well, but whether he can be called a true structuralist or not will be discussed later. To being with, some of the theory's basic notions have to be explained. De Saussure has made a basic difference between *langue*, which is the system of language, and *parole*, which is the use of language by a particular person. Only *langue* is the object study of linguistics, and is primary to parole. When we consider the nature of the sign, it has two elements: the signifier, the material form, the sound, and the signified, the conceptual meaning (not the meaning in reality, but in the dictionary). The relation between these two is arbitrary. The sound is defined through the difference with other sounds and the meaning through the difference with other meanings. The sound and the meaning are closely linked, so that the content of the meaning is defined through the relation of the sound to other sounds. So there is an external difference (sound vs. sound, meaning vs. meaning) and an internal difference (sound vs. meaning). This is called differential definition. Language also has two axes, which have to do with relations. The relation of contiguity is called syntagmatic and of similarity is called paradigmatic. The
first has to do with combining and is called a metonymical process, and the second has to do with making choices and is called a metaphorical process.

The Imaginary Order

As said before, Lacan has made a distinction between the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Because the Imaginary Order precedes the Symbolic, temporary in the development of the child, and structurally, we will first say something about the mirror image and the introduction of the child in the Imaginary order. As Henri Wallon has observed, a very young child lives in a kind of 'spatial realism'. It does not know yet the answer to the question 'Where am I'. It has no idea of itself as a whole. When it sees itself in the mirror, however, it does see itself as a whole, but it is only an image of the whole. The other in the mirror is Imaginary. The child will now identify itself with the image. This is called a dual kind of relation. As will be argued later, this is not yet a real relation, because therefore a third element is needed. This is also not only a stage in the development of the child, but will be important for the rest of its life, notably in relation to 'the other who is the same'. The same identification will play a role here, and so we can account for, say, jealousy. Someone will only be jealous of another person insofar as this other is similar, not totally different.

We can link this up with the notion of the ego in Freud. In the development of the ego he discerns several phases. First there is the auto-erotic phase, and then the narcissistic phase, where the libido is attached to the ego. Here the ego is born. Freud calls the ego the whole of representations and the representation of the whole. He does not explain, however, how this representation of the whole comes about. Lacan can account for this through his analysis of the mirror stage: It happens through the identification with the mirror and with the other. Through the mirror image the child is introduced into the Imaginary Order. This is, however, a delusion. Thus we can say here that lacan radicalises the idea of Freud.

The Symbolic Order

Lacan, as does De Saussure, sees the linguistic system and not the subject as primordial. Man has to 'subject' himself to the order language imposes on the world. But he also considers narratives as part of the system, which De Saussure does not. He calls this field of language and stories the Other, the Symbolic Order, represented as A. For Lacan, there is no real distinction between speaking and language, between langue and parole, because speaking can only be speaking when it wants an answer, and therefore the Other is already implied. Because speaking is demanding, A is also the Other as a person, ie. The community which is addressed and without which there would be no speaking.

As mentioned above, the Saussurian theory of the linguistic sign contains a differential definition. He also insists on the unity of sound and meaning. Lacan will do away with both the differential definition and the unity of sound and meaning. For him, the chain of

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1 A metonymy (Greek for 'word change') is a figure of speech in which one word is substituted for another with which it is closely associated. For example, in the expression The pen is mightier than the sword, the word pen is used for “the written word,” and sword is used for “military power.” A metaphor is a figure of speech in which an expression is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity, for example 'the Lord is my Shepherd'.

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signifiers is the constitutive element. The meaning, the signified, is not given in advance, but comes into being through the game of the signifiers, so the meaning has to be found on the level of the sentences, and is determined by the context. The procedures of selection and combination, of metaphor and metonymy, are used by Lacan to discover the laws that govern the chain of signifiers to process meaning. They are also for Lacan fundamental procedures in the formation of language and significance.

What does Lacan say about reference in his theory? The signs mediate a reference to a reality, but this reality is not present in the Symbolisation, but is re-presented. So the immediacy is lost. The price that is paid for the Symbolisation is thus the loss of the primordial object, the object a, the object of desire. What remains is an emptiness, a trace, something reminding of a fullness. We will say more about this when we discuss 'the Real'.

For Lacan, the unconscious has the same structure as language, and is also constituted of a chain of signifiers. Therefore it is also called the Other, A. Symptoms such as dreams are signifiers, and therefore governed by metaphor and metonymy, the Freudian Verdichtung and Verschiebung. The formation of symbols is mainly a metaphorical process, whereas the structure of desire is metonymical. It is a desire for something that is lost, that cannot be obtained, as we will see later, and it is projected, deferred to something that can be obtained, but will not, in the end, give satisfaction. This deferring will go on and on.

The Lacanian subject is a split one, and language is the cause of this. We have seen that a young child is introduced through the mirror image in the Imaginary Order. But to become a subject, it has to be introduced in the Symbolic Order. At first the mother and the child have an Imaginary relation. The child fulfills the desire of the mother. At a certain point however, the father appears. The Law of the Father forbids an incestuous relation. This is called castration. The child is forbidden an immediate desire of the mother, and can now have a desire of its own. It also gains a position of its own: the position as Child (and not as identified with Mother and Father). The child, that has been the object of desire, the phallus of the mother, now realises that it cannot BE a phallus but there is a promise that it can HAVE one. This is the formation of the Ichideal which is always in the future, a promise. Thus the child is introduced in the Symbolic Order. It is subject to the law, to language and has an own position. So, the Symbolic Order is 'imposed' on the child, it has become subject, but this subject is subject to the law, to language. The genesis of the subject means also the split of the subject. To speak about things means to be silent about other things and therefore the subject that is spoken, that appears in speech, is not the same as the subject that speaks. In the identification of a subject through its narrative not all things are said. The things not said may be just as important.

As said before, a relation, strictly speaking, needs a third term to introduce the difference, and now that the child is introduced in the Symbolic Order, a real relation, no longer the Imaginary one between mother and child, is possible. There is a separation between the unity of two, between the relation and the Symbolic representation, and this leaves and emptiness. The phallus, the Symbolic Order with all its rules and obligations is this third

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2 The Ideall is, on the contrary, Imaginary and present: it is a reality which one is not, in the present. The identification with this Ideall is moreover total, whereas the identification with the Ichideal is partial, limited to something which has Symbolic value.
term, it also introduces the dimension of time, of history, the present and the promise of
the future, and takes away the immediate representation. To accept the discrepancy
between representation and represented is the basis of every human community. If there
has not been such Symbolic castration, for instance because the mother does not
acknowledge any law, and the entrance to the Symbolic Order is blocked, the child has
not become a subject, and this can lead to psychosis. There are no rules, no identity, no
desire, and the person has no answer to the question 'Who am I?'. This proves that it is not
only the Law of the Father that is important but also the willingness of the mother to obey
to the rules. She plays an equally important role and can block the development of the
child.
In sum we can say that the genesis of the subject co-occurs with the entrance into
language, which has to be paid with the price of becoming a split subject and the loss of
the object that causes our desire.

The order of the Real

This is the most difficult Order to talk about, exactly because it is the Order which cannot
be expressed in language. As we have seen, language introduces differences and thus
creates order. A striking example of this is the difference between man and woman. In
social and emotional, sometimes even physical reality, there are no clear-cut
characteristics that would differentiate a man from a woman. A certain man can have
more female characteristics than a specific woman. The only thing on which the
difference is based is a meaningless sign, the phallus. Another metaphor for this is the
creatio ex nihilo: God created order by His Word, the order was not inherent but
imposed. This is exactly the way language works. What is thus lost is an immediate
relation with reality. Culture is forever cut off from nature. There is a loss, a gap at the
centre of the Symbolic Order: it is rooted in a difference that has no essential 'meaning'.
The Order which comes before every Symbolisation or Imagination is called the Order of
the Real. In this respect, also man himself can never be fully known: every man has a
certain emptiness at the core of his being: what is it to be not whole, but a man or a
woman? This loss of wholeness, the impossible state of 'undifferentiality' is the object of
our desire. So, because of Symbolisation, we lose the object of our desire, and only
signposts towards wholeness remain. These are called 'l'objet petit a'. In the Imaginary
construction of phantasy we learn how to live with this. In phantasms, the object a
appears as within reach: it can be dealt with in day dreams. The Lacanian formula for this
relation is $\diamond a$. Our desire is deferred but it gets signifiers.
The Real is barred from the Symbolic Order but it also makes the Symbolic Order
possible as it calls for an endless flux of signifiers to generate meaning. The signifiers
constantly try to signify the Real in the Symbolic Order. Paradoxically, it will never be
possible to put it into words completely: a gap will remain. Therefore, exactly because
communication is somehow doomed to fail (the gap cannot be expressed) we keep on
speaking. With Lacan, we find a core that cannot be Symbolised. This 'movement of
Symbolisation' can be represented as follows:
The arrows do not indicate a causal relation, but a process of Symbolisation. Through the
*object a*, the Symbolic Order refers back to the Real Order. It is the place where the 'brokenness' of the subject, where the gap in the Symbolic Order becomes apparent. For Lacan, this is typically situated in the openings of the body. The voice and the mouth are therefore examples par excellence of the *object a*. Through his look and through his voice the subject gets in touch with others. But at the same time, he loses his look or his voice: he can never see or hear it himself. Thus the price that has to be paid for communication/Symbolisation is the loss of the primordial object *a*, at which the subject's desire is pointed.

In sum, we can say that the Real is that which comes before Symbolisation, and which provokes desire. When it is approached too closely, it is a horrifying reality, but it also makes Symbolisation possible.

The psychotic and the deceit of the Symbolic Order

We all have to live with the fact that there is something missing in the Symbolic Order (S (A)). There is no final fixed meaning or truth that would offer a guaranteed support to the entire system. The Other seems to be a closed, consistent system, but there is always a gap. We have to believe, however, that our culture corresponds to some truth, in order to live a normal life. For a psychotic person the introduction in the Symbolic Order has somehow failed. Therefore his relationship with this Order is not sound. Everything in the world has to be interpreted, has to fit in a plan. Thus the Symbolic Order is used in an Imaginary way: the phantasm of a closed Symbolic Order can only be realised on the level of fantasy. Psychotics take this phantasm for Real. But this has to fail: there will always be things that escape Symbolisation. When his attempts to 'understand' the world keep failing, the psychotic will believe that the Symbolic Order is deceiving him. Because he cannot accept that the Symbolic Order is not fully 'closed' he will believe that there is an 'Other of the Other' responsible for this deceit. This 'Other of the Other' is a kind of marionette player: he holds the strings of the Symbolic Order and thus manipulates it. Paranoiac constructions such as the *Doppelgänger* or the evil pursuer are Imaginary examples of this.

For a good introduction in Jacques Lacan's thinking try this: