# **The subject of psychoanalysis is the subject of science**

# **An analysis of modern objectivity through Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Freud and Lacan**

2023

A Summer school held by School of Philosophy at Zhejiang University

## **Basic Info:**

**Instructor:** Prof. Gertrudis Van de Vijver (Ghent University, Belgium)

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**Organizer**: Bohang Chen (Zhejiang University)

**Teaching Assistant**: Feng Li (Zhejiang University)

**Time:** 2023.7.3-7, 15:00-17:25 (Beijing time)

**Platform: Zoom (Online)**

## **Introduction:**

The question of the subject only emerges when something falls out of the obvious: it is only by bumping into the wall that the latter ceases to be obvious, becomes an obstacle, a confusing thing to be interrogated that calls on the subject that is facing it. Scientific objectivity is no exception to this logic. Indeed, a scientific object is far from self-evident. It was Descartes who, at the advent of modern science, seized its baffling moment, seeking to recover, through doubt, certainty at the level of the knowing subject. However, it is psychoanalysis, first and foremost that of Lacan, that deserves the credit for pointing out the "psychic household" behind the Cartesian gesture: the subject who thinks, and who, above all, speaks, is with its objects, more, it is in its objects, or still, it is called to be by the objects in which it is always already caught up. If the subject is to be sought, it is there and nowhere else, in its stumbling blocks, its hesitations, its fears with objects. To address the question of the subject, we must therefore first and foremost articulate what it is about the object, and what shows itself there as a limit.

In this Summer school, I invite you to follow in the footsteps of Descartes, Kant and Husserl, but also and above all in the footsteps of Freud and Lacan, the idea that it is the object that runs the show, and that the subject, even with all its cogitative and representational apparatus that we have known so well since Descartes, is on the contrary that which follows in the footsteps of the object - which takes in, resists, pulsates in its vagaries - and is born subject insofar as it allows itself to be divided by it ad infinitum. It is from this angle that I shall approach the question of scientific objectivity in general, and that of psychoanalysis in particular. If Lacan considers that the subject of psychoanalysis is the subject of science, this refers to the idea that without the particular position of the subject from Descartes onwards (and thus of modern science), psychoanalysis would never have seen the light of day.

## **Schedules:**

### **Day 1: The subject in pursuit of the object: Descartes' transcendental motive (Husserl)**

It is tempting to believe that the Cartesian subject, the thinking subject, the cogito, is what holds the reins for thinking the world. Husserl allows us to approach things differently: the cogito is what must be presupposed in order to explain the knowledge that is always already produced of objects in the world. According to Husserl, it is this transcendental motive that truly opens up the horizon of modernity, and at the same time heralds its main crisis figures: objectivism and subjectivism. We will discuss Husserl's viewpoint on objectivism and subjectivism against the background of the emergence of the modern sciences, and open the question of what can be meant with scientific objectivity.

**Literature:** Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of the European Sciences, minimally §1-7, preferably §1-10.

**Question:** What does Husserl precisely mean with the transcendental motive of Descartes? How is his analysis inscribed in a historical-teleological method and what are its epistemological consequences?

### **Day 2: The constraint is possibility: the constitution of objectivity (Kant)**

With Kant, there is no longer any entrenchment in the thinking subject, the thinking substance, but instead an invitation to take upon ourselves a world of objects that are always already constituted. The light dove will be our guide: let us stop flying ever higher, to the heavens if possible, thinking that the resistance of the air prevents us from doing so. No, the resistance of the air is the very possibility of flying; without it, we wouldn't even be flying! The constraint is the possibility. In other words: it is within our subjective means, with all that these entail in terms of capacities, feelings and limits, that the space in which object and subject can arise is prepared and articulated. Functional space, as I will argue: the functionalism of reason, according to Kant. Functional space ... space of language.

**Literature:**

·Van de Vijver, G. & Demarest, B. (2013). “Objectivity: its meaning, its limitations, its fateful ommissions”, in Van de Vijver, G. & Demarest, B. (eds.) Objectivity after Kant. Its meaning, its limitations, its fateful objections. Hildesheim: Olms: vii-xxviii;

·Kant, Critique of pure Reason (fragments); Critique of Judgment (fragments), Jäsche Logic (fragments)

**Question:** What are the epistemological consequences of a transcendental viewpoint on the object (as determinable), for the conception of the thinking subject?

### **Day 3: "Man thinks with his object" (Freud-Lacan)**

And here we are, ready to take up these philosophical ideas at a more intimate, more corporeal level, closer to our means of grasping things, less fickle perhaps, who is to say? But the flight will be more disconcerting too, since the body, as we shall see, will turn out to be radically caught up in the objects of language, even and especially in its most meaningless sound fragments, the Lacanian signifiers. I will try to get as close as possible to the idea that man thinks with his objects by showing, through Freud's little fragment on 'fort-da', that language very literally makes things for us, and cuts us up according to an abstract logic, involving both a principle of pleasure and a principle of inscription beyond pleasure, the latter forcing us to return to our steps and repeat eternally.

**Literature:**

·Lacan, Seminar XI – The Four Fundamental Concepts (12.02.1964);

·Freud, "Beyond the pleasure principle" (part II)

**Question:** What are, for Freud and Lacan, the basic reasons to consider repetition as more fundamental than the striving for pleasure for the psychic system? What could it imply for our drive to know?

### **Day 4: "No object without the dimension of satisfaction" (Lacan)**

We will now consider the epistemological consequences of this point of view. We will start with Kant's remarks on the living being in his Third Critique, in which he highlights the limits of objectification, the limits of representability of the living being. Kant rightly calls this Third Critique the Critique of pleasure and displeasure! It is a good opportunity, then, to forge even closer links between Kant and Lacan around the idea that there can be no object (no representation, no signifier) without the dimension of pleasure. On this occasion, we'll have to clear things up as far as the experience of satisfaction is concerned. With, of course, the question of the subject in mind. Here we are following Kant, who said that life cannot be objectified - a matter of principle. But we also follow Freud, who emphasized that the purpose of life is death. The death drive and the repetition compulsion reflect what had struck Freud at the heart of his practice: both the human tendency to choose the path of least resistance (pleasure, death), and the relentless repetition, forever suspended in the tension. Where is the human subject? But is this the right question? Isn't it rather: where do we expect this human subject to be? Where do we suppose it should be? Or: what space should we aim for to accommodate him?

**Literature:**

·Van de Vijver et al., "The mark, the Thing and the object";

·Lacan, La logique du fantasme, séance du 15.02 (fragment, session 15.02.1967, pp. 109-113)

**Question:**  What does the focus on the signifier and on repetition compulsion imply for the constitution of subject and object? What clinical difference would it make to focus first of all on the repetition compulsion, and not on the pursuit of pleasure or the satisfaction of needs?

### **Day 5 : The subject of science is the subject of psychoanalysis (Lacan-Zupančič)**

In this last session, we come back to Lacan's idea that the subject of psychoanalysis is the subject of science. We connect this to the idea that the drive to know is something that concerns subjectivity at heart, and consider the ways of knowing, such as the modern scientific one, starting from the specific logical placement of the subject. We argue that psychoanalysis reveals the modern scientific striving for knowledge as a striving for the purely predicative, functional grasping of the object, whereby the position of the subject is neglected, forgotten, even eliminated, to disappear itself completely in an object predicatively grasped. History of science can on this basis be described as a series of attempts to deny the recurrent and insisting manifestations of the subject, through forms of objectivism and subjectivism (cf. Husserl) as well as through the persistent and often naturalistically grounded attempts at specialization. Through Lacan's formulae of sexuation, we illustrate further the importance of the drive to know, conceived as the key to sexuality, arguing that it is the not-wanting to know that leads to dominant forms of collectivization that are grounded in exclusion and, most often, not without violence.

**Literature:** Alenka Zupančič, What is sex? (pp. 74-85)

**Question:** What is the epistemological stance taken by Lacan through his famous statement "There is no sexual relationship?" What is there to be learned from it in relation to the pursuit of scientific objectivity or truth, from its very beginnings, and up to this very day, where it is highly institutionalized and commercialized?

**Course assignments (or, how to get your credits?):**

Based on our lectures and suggested readings, write ONE short essay to respond to TWO questions (among a few) raised by Prof. Gertrudis Van de Vijver.

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