

Chapter 1

The Deflationary Ontology of Lacan and Nietzsche

Nietzsche wanted to surpass the Good of Platonism because he believed it to have turned *against* nature, the body and its senses, and thus eventually against our capacities for a creative, flourishing life. This chapter considers how Lacan's own analysis of the Good in his 1959–1960 *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, extends on Nietzsche's project.

Section 1.1 discusses the real and imaginary distinctions that Nietzsche argues were confused historically by Plato's Good. Then it considers Lacan's *tripartite* schema of the *symbolic*, the imaginary and the real to augment Nietzsche's purpose of deflating the Good—a purpose Lacan is found to share when motioning to discuss “the evolution of history, in order to demystify the Platonic and the Aristotelian view of the good, indeed of the Supreme Good” (SVII: 216). Section 1.2 turns to Lacan's returning of Aristotle's Good to the polymorphous perversities at the base of desire, to the Freudian Thing, the unruly real. I observe this Thing to manifest as our most amoral truths, painful truths we try to exclude, which leads Lacan to infer a pleasure principle in the projection of the Good as the *center* of the cosmos—as if this were an ultimate reality or essence of nature that guaranteed happiness, design, protection.

I suggest for Lacan as well as Nietzsche that the metaphysics of the Good will mean some error, fiction, or fantasy in the imaginary has been mistaken as “true” or “real,” when it is really only a symptom of the *repression* of a particular aspect of the truth, or modicum of the real, if not the source of the repression itself. This will bring us to the discontent that Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan each take the inflationary Good of moralism to cause: for what this Good disavows inevitably *returns*, by virtue of the disavowed being *real*.

1.1 Lacan's Tripartite Schema with Nietzsche's Critique of Plato's Good

I will not, in fact, be able to avoid a certain inquiry into historical progress. It is at this point I must refer to those guiding terms, those terms of reference which I use, namely, the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. (Lacan, SVII:11)

Lacan's guiding terms of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real make up what he refers to in a 1953 text as "the three registers of human reality." Marc De Kesel notes this text to hold the "first version" of Lacan's triadic "move," which Marcelle Marini suggests would then "form the framework of his entire theory."¹ Before discussing this tripartite schema, I examine Nietzsche's criticism of Plato's Good and the proto-Christian Platonism he takes it to spawn, so as to situate the criticism Lacan also makes of this Good for being merely imaginary. In light of this shared criticism, the task is to see how all three parts of Lacan's schema are useful to Nietzsche's project of reevaluating this Good's values.

Nietzsche's project is based on the claim that Plato's Good *reverses* what is real and imaginary in the field of ethics. In his *Twilight of the Idols* of 1888, his climactic final year of writing, Nietzsche suggests that moral judgment henceforth shares with religious judgment "a level of ignorance at which even the concept of the real, the distinction between the real and the imaginary, is lacking." He indicates this reversal is finally coming undone in the modern era when adding that "at such a level 'truth' denotes nothing but things which we today call 'imaginings'" (TI VII:1).

A few sections later, Nietzsche designates Plato's role in this initial moral-religious reversal when portraying him to have "deviated" from the "instincts of the Hellenes" and become "morally infected" when, like an "antecedent Christian," he already has "the concept 'good' as the supreme concept" (TI X:2). It is the *inflationary* nature of this Good, that is, its *projection* into a supernatural imaginary, that leads Nietzsche to conclude he "should prefer to describe the entire phenomenon 'Plato' by the harsh term 'higher swindle' or, if you prefer, 'idealism,' than by any other" (TI X:2).²

Nietzsche takes the best Hellenic instincts, which Plato deviated from, to be typified in the "*Sophist culture*" or "*realist-culture*" of those such as Thucydides. In contrast to Thucydides' "strong, stern, hard matter-of-factness," Nietzsche suggests "Plato is a coward in the face of reality" who "flees into the ideal" (TI X:2).³ We find this contrast also in one of Nietzsche's unpublished notes of 1888, which states that "the high culture of Thucydides," "as necessarily as Plato's does *not*," belongs to "the Periclean age" which "has

its predecessors in Heraclitus, in Democritus, in the scientific types of the old philosophy,” adding that today “every advance in epistemological and moral knowledge has reinstated the Sophists” (WP 428).

Brian Leiter explains that Nietzsche’s conviction that the best philosophers came before Plato comes from the “methodological naturalism,” “empiricism,” and “realism” he often shares with them—in viewing, for instance, “nature as continuous throughout,” of which we have emerged as merely one of its products, “so that even the understanding of human beings must proceed apace with the understanding of the rest of nature.”⁴ The empiricism entailed in this view, that is, Nietzsche’s often stated view that “evidence of truth comes only from the senses” (BGE 134), also stands in stark contrast to what Nietzsche decried as the “Platonic slander of the senses” that was a “preparation of the soil for Christianity” (WP 427).⁵

Lacan for his part illustrates with the Cathars, a puritanical Christian sect, how such a slander of the senses in the form of the belief that “evil is in matter” because it entails “generation as well as corruption,” conditions the “ascetic task” of “turning away” to an imaginary Beyond, “an Edenic world characterised by purity and light,” as if “the true world of the original good creator” (SVII:124). And although commentators suggest that after Plato there were in fact *sceptics* in the Academy he started—particularly under the leadership of Arcesilaus—this period of Academic scepticism, from about 274 to 74 BC, was both preceded and followed by the religiously dogmatic, doctrinal codification of Plato’s metaphysics of the forms and of the Good that was to prove so conducive to later onto-theological ventures.⁶

Mark McPherran notes that Plato was already assimilating the prevailing “Pythagorean, possibly Orphic,” religious views of his time on the soul’s catharsis and reincarnation⁷—and although Nietzsche is skeptical of Plato’s “integrity” on doctrines like the “separate immortality of ‘souls,’” claiming here that Plato merely “wanted to have *taught* as absolute truth what he himself did not regard as even conditionally true” (WP 428), still Nietzsche holds Plato responsible for the distinctive promulgation of these beliefs and our eventual moral-religious capture by them. Laurence Lampert suggests that because “interpreters of Plato as competent, as different, and as separated by time as Plutarch, Montaigne, and Nietzsche all read Plato in a similar way,” this “should inspire contemporary scholars to pay more attention to the view they share,” a view “also held by other great readers such as Francis Bacon and Descartes.”⁸

This religious sense to Plato is there in *Phaedo*, where the Good is seen as the “divine force” that “causes things to be now placed as it is best for them to be placed,” and where skeptics are rebuked who “give no thought to the Good which must embrace and hold together all things.”⁹ As Charles

Kahn notes, whereas in *Meno* “the immortality and pre-existence of the soul was taken for granted,” in *Phaedo* it is “systematically argued for”¹⁰—and it enables Plato to conceive like a proto-Christian of a postmortem judgment by the Good, when writing about heaven for those “who have duly purified themselves by philosophy” and are thus “freed from these regions within the earth,” “released as from prisons,” to “live henceforth altogether without bodies.”¹¹ What Nietzsche saw as the *anti-nature* in Plato manifests in this tendency to treat earth and body as a prison and fantasize of life without them. Accordingly, Maudemarie Clark refers to Plato’s *Phaedo* as a “great panegyric to the ascetic ideal.”¹²

We can see in Plato’s *Republic* how his ascetics affect his epistemology. This is not only in the marginalization of anything bodily in the acquisition of knowledge, namely the senses—a marginalization that Deborah Modrak points to also being in *Phaedo*¹³—but also in the view that, as Plato put it, “the idea of Good” is “this reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower,” as “the cause of knowledge, and of truth,” as if “objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known” but also “their very existence and essence.”¹⁴ When Plato has his Socrates add that even then, “the Good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power,” the interlocutor Glaucon will only “very ludicrously” answer, “Heaven save us, hyperbole can no further go.”¹⁵ But more in accordance with this suggestion of hyperbole, Nietzsche would remark firstly that the Good is not real but imaginary and only *falsely* claimed to be real, to be *most* real even, whereas the opposite is closer to the truth; and second that this Good is thus inimical toward what is actually real—*as a rival*—especially toward the bodily parts that constitute so much of earthly experience.

Lacan in his *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, also gives, for instance, the following indication of his own lack of sympathy toward this highest truth and value status of Plato’s Good, when saying of King Creon, as he appears in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, that “his error . . . is to want to promote the good of all—and I don’t mean the Supreme Good, for let us not forget that 441 BC is very early, and our friend Plato hadn’t yet created the mirage of that Supreme Good” (SVII:259). By calling Plato’s Good “mirage,” Lacan is ostensibly agreeing with Nietzsche that it is more correct to predicate it imaginary than “real” or “true.” Moreover (as I argue in chapter 3), Creon is being shown by Lacan to give a *proto-Platonic* example of the *ethical* error the Good can involve, how “the good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy” (SVII:259). This suggests that not only is the Good not actually real for Lacan, neither

is it “good” either in terms of the effects it has, effects that can be tragically fatal, again a view that is shared by Nietzsche.

The mirage structure of this Good is well surmised by the Nietzschean maxim: “the less real, the more valuable. This is Platonism” (WP 572)—where Nietzsche notes that one of the strategies for believing what is *less* real has *more* value, is to label such an entity “most real” regardless. And this for Nietzsche is what Plato did with his idea of the Good, he substituted an imaginary for the real, which, as Lacan also says in the pejorative sense of Plato, relegated what is actually real to “no more than an imitation of a more-than-real, of a surreal,” “since for him everything that exists only exists in relation to the idea, which is the real” (SVII:141).

We know Lacan is taking the pejorative sense because it follows what he calls Plato’s “aberration” and “unyielding position” in placing “art at the lowest level among human works,” because by imitating earthly objects, Plato held art to only imitate what was already an imitation of a better world *Beyond*, reducing art to mere “shadow of a shadow” (SVII:141).¹⁶ This lends itself to Nietzsche’s view that Plato rendered the earthly less-than-real or inferior because of its distance from a world of the Good imagined above. For Nietzsche held that it was this otherworld that enabled the earthly to be rebaptized “false” precisely on account of properties that make it *real*: “change, becoming, multiplicity” (WP 584); or “death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth” (TI III:1)—in short, all the things that can challenge us in life and also make us suffer.¹⁷ To talk then of “another’ world” for Nietzsche was sheer “phantasmagoria,” a “moral-optical illusion” that was “constructed out of the contradiction to the actual world” so that we may escape, even “*revenge* ourselves on life” (TI III:6).

Lacan gives further evidence in *Seminar VII* of a similarly skeptical stance by directly pronouncing “there is no Sovereign Good,” that this is what Freud has shown him, that “the good as such,” “the eternal object of the philosophical quest in the sphere of ethics” and “philosopher’s stone of all the moralists,” is “radically denied by Freud” (SVII:96). Later Lacan explains that this “radical repudiation of a certain ideal of the good is necessary” because “the good erects a strong wall across the path of our desire” (SVII:230), whereas an ethics would be better served by a greater self-awareness. And again he shows it is this same inflated Good as Nietzsche he has in mind when invoking to discuss “the progress of thought” and “evolution of history” so as to “demystify the Platonic and the Aristotelian idea of the good, indeed of the Supreme Good” (SVII:216).¹⁸

It is apropos of the historical part of this inquiry that Lacan states he must make use of his three terms of reference, “the symbolic, the imaginary,

and the real" (SVII:11). But Lacan has a nuanced way of using these terms that, if we are not careful, may impede their use not only for Nietzsche's goal of rejecting Plato, but also for Lacan's own critique of the Good.

We have seen how the real for Nietzsche, in contradistinction to all Platonism, is the earthly world of becoming, the world of nature without and within. All the grounds on which this world has in the past been designated as mere appearance, for Nietzsche, "establish rather its reality" (TI III:6). Lacan does not at all deny the reality of natural kinds as he does, rather, point to how "things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all" (SVII:45). This is because once we bring things into focus with words like "human," "animal," "plant," "mineral," "atom," "mass," "energy"—words that invoke concepts, categories, formulas, *and* images—we enter into the symbolic and imaginary registers through which reality is mediated for us.

Richardson thus points to a distinction between the real and reality in Lacan, where reality refers to the "images and symbolic structures of language" we use to circumscribe the real. Accordingly, Richardson calls the real "the raw experience of what-is, the not yet symbolized or imaged" that is also "impossible" to *completely* "inscribe in any symbolic system or represent in any form of image."¹⁹

The real as this pre-symbolized, pre-imaged substrate to our human reality is also a straight forward reading of what Lacan in *Seminar VII* calls "the real in its totality, both the real of the subject and the real he has to deal with as exterior to him" (SVII:118). But Lacan will often use the term *the real* for what in *Seminar VII* he mostly calls "the Thing," a potentially disturbing aspect of our experience "because," Lacan explains, "the Thing is that which in the real, the primordial real . . . suffers from the signifier" (SVII:118)—that is, suffers from *repression*, and then *returns*—leading Charles Shepherdson to discuss a difference in Lacan between "a 'pre-symbolic real' and a 'post-symbolic real.'"²⁰

Insofar as our attempts to structure the real employ the methods of science, then just as with language, Lacan refers not to the imaginary but to the *symbolic* register, to the "increasing power of symbolic mastery" that "has not stopped enlarging its field since Galileo" (SVII:122), alluding to the latter's famous metaphor of the book of nature being written in mathematics. But Lacan is also showing the influence of Koyré who at times emphasized the symbolic over against the empirical aspect of science.²¹ Given Galileo's meticulous incline plane experiments, use of telescopes, and persecution by the Church, it leads Lacan to entertain what for Nietzsche might be thought the misleading thesis that "modern science, the kind that was born with

Galileo, could only have developed out of biblical or Judaic ideology, and not out of ancient philosophy or the Aristotelian tradition” (SVII:122).²²

The mathematical aspect of the symbolic is, in any case, also evident in Nietzsche when he points to the epistemic role played by the “science of formulae, sign systems: such as logic and that applied logic, mathematics” (TI III:3); or when he praises Greeks and Romans for having natural science “on the best possible road” because “in concert with mathematics and mechanics” (AC 59). But when adding the caveat that in our sign systems alone, “reality” may not “appear at all, not even as a problem,” Nietzsche shows his empiricist unwillingness to stray from the bedrock of “the evidence of the senses” (TI III:3)—unlike Platonism, which could Pythagoreanize mathematics as if it were a portal to a supernatural Beyond.²³

Although next to Lacan, Nietzsche seems more empiricist in his account of science, he is no “naïve” empiricist, holding that when we use our sense data to *image* the external world, this involves a degree of interpretation and thus, to an extent, simplification, omission, and even falsification.²⁴ But equally there are “idealists of the philosophical tradition” Lacan rejects as “small beer” when “compared to Freud,” who affirm that “we are the ones who give shape to reality and that there is no point in looking any further” (SVII: 30). Thus, when sensory images are how Richardson introduces Lacan’s *imaginary* register²⁵—Lacan and Nietzsche can both stress the import of not conflating empirical imaging with the main subjective sense the imaginary takes in psychology, where sensible images are further embellished or invested *in* a subject’s imagination. Here we enter the place of dreaming, fantasy, identification, and projection, but also that of creativity and the arts. It is where as Kant might say, the imaginary *takes the lead* of the understanding so that the two faculties are set into “free play”—or as Freud might say “free association”—until one’s images correspond to nothing directly real in the external world any longer, but can still be of much significance apropos of one’s desire.²⁶

“What is real is also there outside,” Freud tells us, whereas “what is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal.”²⁷ Examples of these latter internals relevant for Nietzsche’s purpose would be an anthropomorphic God who created the universe; a heavenly world that the pious return to after death; and a Sovereign idea of a moral Good as the cause or *telos* of all things considered. Such entities for Nietzsche are wholly unreal and imaginary, existing only in the minds of those who entertain them. And where such entities entail moral claims, then “taken literally,” Nietzsche adds, they “designate only “nonsense,” but as “*semiotics*,” “sign-language,” and “symptomatology,” they reveal the “precious realities” and “inner worlds” of

those who “did not *know* enough to ‘understand’ themselves” (TI VII:1), which calls to mind Lacan’s view of the unconscious structured as a language.²⁸

Insofar as life is regulated by such morality that both conceals and reveals, Lacan refers in *Seminar VII* to “the moral law” as an “agency” or “action” which is not only “structured by the symbolic” and “grafted onto the real,” but also what causes something else or Other to emerge, whereupon “the real is actualised” (SVII:20–1). This indicates the two aspects of the real that Shepherdson discusses in Lacan. The *pre*-symbolic real is what Lacan is indicating the moral law is *grafted onto*, what Sean Homer also refers to as the “concrete” or “brute materiality that exists prior to symbolisation”; whereas the *post*-symbolic real is this mysterious Other invoked by Lacan, that thereupon is actualized and later re-emerges.²⁹

This *post*-symbolic real suggests a return of the repressed, perhaps caused by the *oppositional* way our morality had led us to symbolize portions of the real, returning them thus to mind as what we prefer to forget. Such can be the effect of desire when stemming from the parts of the real that make up our own bodies: “the private parts, the hairy ones to be precise, the animal ones,” Bataille would write, just two years before Lacan would launch his own seminar on ethics.³⁰ For such desire can bring to mind what morally we might prefer to deny, like the subject who “censures,” Lacan observes, as if “he doesn’t want it” (SVII:14).

As pulsing beneath our thoughts, dreams, reflections in the imaginary, such desire can bear what Lacan notes as “the kind of discomfort that makes it so difficult for our neurotic patients to confess certain of their fantasms” (SVII:80). Hence, desire is pushed from mind, or such is the plan, making it *un*-conscious as if the source of all our ills—whence indeed it can be if it seeps out unbeknownst to our selves, through the cracks and joining of our best symbolic structures, at the interstitial peripheries of our proudest, most inflationary moral structures.

Such desire is also critical for the anti-Platonist project of Nietzsche, as it is precisely where one is tempted to *image* and *symbolize* the real only so as to elide it better. To *slough* the real off, to conceal rather than reveal while pretending in fact to do the opposite—as if to promote ourselves as not so much inimical to the real but living in accordance with a higher, ultimate reality like Plato’s Good which, for Nietzsche, was always an *all-too-human* construction. But such a construction we cannot always admit to being author of, if it is one in the *imaginary* used to cover over what is actually real—the real that is nothing so concerned to alleviate anxieties, fulfill our whims, or grant us cosmic paths to a “true world” in the Beyond.

Here with such cosmological projections, “‘the true world’ is supposed to be the good world—why?” (WP 578), Nietzsche asks, noting how often it

is the case that “to imagine another more valuable world” is “an expression of hatred for a world that actually makes one suffer,” how it is “the *ressentiment* of metaphysicians against actuality that is here creative” (WP 579).³¹ But perhaps there is some-*thing* residually real that even Nietzsche leaves out?—when we consider what Lacan in his *Ethics Seminar* will call *das Ding*, the somewhat diabolical *Freudian Thing*. It purports to be our own hyper-perverse little portion of the real, arising as a little disturbance in the head, and a concept I examine in the section to follow.

1.2 Lacan’s Freudian Thing in the Critique of Aristotle’s Good

Well, as odd as it may seem to that superficial opinion which assumes any inquiry into ethics must concern the field of the ideal, if not of the unreal, I, on the contrary, will proceed instead from the other direction by going more deeply into the notion of the real . . . one has to look at what occurred in the interval between Aristotle and Freud. (Lacan, SVII:11)

In the previous section, by way of Nietzsche’s critique of Plato, I discussed Lacan’s tripartite schema as a deflationary ontology that also rejects the Good. I suggested it is the aspect of the real at the base of desire that is aimed at antipathetically by Plato’s Good. Now I explore this antipathy through Lacan’s *Seminar VII* concept of the Thing, through how it appears as a perverse sense of the real, and how Lacan contrasts it with one of the products of Plato’s Academy, the thought of Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* Lacan invokes as “among the most exemplary and certainly the most valid” points of departure (SVII:22).

Lacan asks us to look at Aristotle to “consider how far that notion of nature is different from ours,” because Aristotle’s is one to support an ethics which believes it can legitimately involve “the exclusion of all bestial desires” from the field of morality, as if nature were innately inclined to foster “happiness” and “human fulfilment” (SVII:13). These excluded elements, however, constitute a “category of desires,” of “sexual desires,” which Lacan suggests is now “situated in the forefront of our experience” (SVII:5), making his own “notion of nature” closer to the Bataille who writes that “nature herself is violent,” especially following our failures to bring its many stirrings completely “to heel.”³² This is evident in the questions since raised by the clinic of psychoanalysis, some of which had also found support in the sexologies of those such as Havelock Ellis, where desire seems to work *against* any individual or social Good.³³ Regarding the latter, Lacan would add that “the

pile of garbage is one of the sides of the human dimension that it would be wrong to mistake" (SVII:233).

Back in the fourth century BC, however, Aristotle has a view of the *macrocosm* that he believes supports him. Lacan notes how in Aristotle "notions of microcosm and macrocosm are presupposed from the beginning" as intimately connected, so that ethics can be "brought together in a Sovereign Good," through a "point of insertion, attachment or convergence," in which "ethics becomes politics and beyond that with an *imitation* of the cosmic order" (SVII:22). To borrow the language of Kant, as Lacan at one point does, it is as if the "starry heavens above" would naturally lure some "moral law within" (SVII:316) toward a "god at the centre of the Aristotelian world governed by *nous*" (SVII:23). Thus, for Aristotle, Lacan infers, "insofar as there is something divine in man, it is in his bond to nature" (SVII:13).³⁴

A criticism Nietzsche makes of the Stoics also applies to Aristotle here, for Nietzsche held that whereas the Stoics believed their morality had them living "according to nature," these "deceptive words" masked the fact that the Stoics were reading and imposing their own ideals *into* nature, so that nature was then forced to live "according to the Stoa" (BGE 9). While exploring Nietzsche's encounter with the Stoic Epictetus, moreover, R.O. Elveton observes that it is actually "the Platonic myth of a rationally designed cosmos" that "survives in Epictetus's repeated appeals to the teleology discoverable in nature," precisely the myth "dismissed by Nietzsche as one of the Christian/Platonic West's central philosophical prejudices."³⁵

Nevertheless, when Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with what he calls the "well said" claim that "the Good is That at which all things aim," he immediately indicates a deflationary intention by seeking to narrow his inquiry into this Good to strictly *human* activity.³⁶ As Gabriel Lear explains, Aristotle seeks to put "the metaphysical issue aside as a distraction from the business of practical philosophy," and in capturing this "practicable aspect of the human good," claims his approach is "to be preferred to Plato's."³⁷ Lacan appears to agree in motioning to discuss Aristotle because "the *Nicomachean Ethics* is properly speaking the first book to be organised around an ethics" (SVII:36), which is not to say Lacan will not find issues with parts that bear on Aristotle's metaphysical convictions.

Aristotle defines our striving for the Good as striving for "happiness [*eudaimonia*]," which he believes one is naturally befitted for unless one were of "disease," "sexual perversion," given to "insanity," had hailed from "tribes of barbarians," "savage tribes," or had been "abused from childhood" in a way which affected "habit" or "arrested development."³⁸ We can see where metaphysics is involved in Aristotle's hopes for our ability to aim for the Good when he considers animals to be *unnatural* because *not* rational, and

to be hence determinable as “aberrations” from the essence of nature as he defines it.³⁹ Daniel Graham thus resituates Aristotle’s notion of nature with his belief in “a first unmoved mover,” “identified with divinity as a transcendent final cause of the cosmos,” a “transcendent source of reality that has more in common with the Platonic forms than Aristotle would like to admit.”⁴⁰

For Lacan, however, psychoanalysis has since turned such an ethics on its head by revealing a far *smaller distance* between us and “a whole register of desire” that Aristotle calls “monstrous” and situates “outside of the field of morality” (SVII:5). Lacan attributes this turn—or *return*—to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, but hints at it being also nascent in the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century, following on from “the moment when the disorienting effects of Newtonian physics is felt” (SVII:76), science was further revealing the *real* of what we conceived of as “nature” or “the universe” to be far less moral-rational by design than previously hoped, as we came to find ourselves “in the middle of a huge construction site,” in a “funny little corner,” like “a watch that someone forgot” (SVII:316).

Nietzsche surmises the meta-ethical implications when surveying the universe overall and declaring that in it “becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*” (WP 12), and “none of our aesthetic or moral judgments apply to it” (GS 109). But Nietzsche continues to speak of a “return to nature” that, like it or not, is a more “frightful nature and naturalness” than “return-to-nature” idealists like “Rousseau” imagined—adding that “great tasks” in the field of ethics are no longer possible without our mindfulness of the frightful aspects as well (TI IX:48).⁴¹

When it comes to these aspects, in what he calls their “repellent, unchristian, immoral truth” (GM I:1), Nietzsche would encourage for the few who are able a realist, scientific rationality and a grand-style, artistic-creative sublimation—rather than say any heretofore repression, fantasy, or phobic denial. Nevertheless, Freud in fact would claim that despite “the many instances” (SE14:16) where Nietzsche was his antecedent, Nietzsche had “failed to recognize infantilism,” that is, had not expressly elaborated on a polymorphous and perverse sexuality born in every infant child.⁴² Thus, relative to psychoanalysis, Nietzsche’s ethics may seem closer to Aristotle’s in that, despite the absence of inflated metaphysics, it *aims* for a greater “*pathos of distance*” (GM I:2) between us and the perverse than psychoanalysis, with its immense detailing of this perversity at the core of human nature from birth, would later perhaps deem so admissible.⁴³

This perverse core is what Lacan’s *Seminar VII* finds so understated in Aristotle’s notion of nature and pertains to “*das Ding*” (SVII:71), “The Freudian Thing” (SVII:132). At one point he likens this Thing to Freud’s use of “the term *das Es* [the It]” (SVII:137), suggesting the Freudian Thing is

close to the Freudian Id. But Lacan also warns that the “primacy of the *Es*” (SVII:137) was “forgotten” with the uptake of the later Freud’s use of the term “id,” where the focus seemed to shift towards fortifying the “ego.” This is why Lacan can instead be found “calling a certain zone of reference ‘the Thing’” (SVII:137), rather than the id, which he soon begins to qualify paradoxically as our excluded and thence *decentered* center.

This center can be read as originating out of the amoral impulses of our bodies as experienced from within, given what Lacan suggests are the “residues of archaic forms of the libido,” forming a “nucleus” at the “source of the *Triebe* [drives]” which is “irreducible,” and “never completely resolved” (SVII:93). Such drives are said by Freud to *ideationally represent* these more archaic, somatic impulses when they come to mind, for they do so by way of language and image in addition to being felt, by way of what Lacan refers to as *the signifier*.⁴⁴ Yet to the contrary of all Platonism, including Aristotle’s, Lacan must add that at the center of these signifiers “there is no Sovereign good” (SVII:70), only the Thing which is “the-beyond-of-the-signified” (SVII:54), and “at the centre only in the sense that it is excluded” (SVII:71).

It is excluded because it includes for Lacan our memories of what Freud disclosed as the already sexualized “pre-genital characteristics” surrounding infantile functions of sensing, eating, evacuation, and pleasure, “with its eternal polymorphism,” “from the oral to the anal and the genital” (SVII:92). These latent perversions are what De Kesel suggests constitute the complete psychoanalytic *subversion* of the subject as Aristotle conceives it, insofar as now “from the Freudian perspective, desire is at odds with natural self-realisation.”⁴⁵

Freud defines these subversive and thus largely disallowed, repressed, unconscious desires as “egoistic, sadistic, perverse or incestuous” (SE19:132). He also calls them our “individual” sense of the “prehistoric” (SE19:220), a *second* sense he takes himself to have discovered in each of our childhoods, to go with the first Darwin discovered for the species.⁴⁶ This is likely behind Lacan’s view of the Thing as “the pre-historic Other that is impossible to forget” (SVII:71), although forget it we try, for when it arises it is *transgressive* toward our moral norms and cultural forms, leading us to experience the Thing as trauma, as a disturbance in the head—whether emerging in ourselves or observable in the behavior of another.

Hence, for Lacan, the Thing is split off—“*Spaltung*” (SVII:209)—by a child during the course of socialization, made object of that great wave of primal repression said by Freud to usher in a sexual latency for the child around the age of five, as the Oedipal material cleaves into the incest taboo, whence it encounters the threat of castration. This, for Freud, explains how our more directly sexual impulses become absent until years later in puberty

where, as Lacan puts it, they can return only by forming a “magic circle” (SVII:134) around the Thing below, which is still as present as it is in part forbidden—a kernel of the *real* in our desire.⁴⁷

Certain aspects of this Thing would only cause us *pain* to reconsider, let alone experience, which for Freud explains the perpetual resistances toward the claims of psychoanalysis, and the tenacity of subsequent scholars to refute them nigh by any means at the intellect’s disposal.⁴⁸ For Lacan, moreover, it is the unspeakable nature of this Thing that explains why the pleasure principle aims *not* to try and satisfy as many of our drives as directly as possible, but “to avoid excess, too much pleasure” (SVII:54), so that “in the name of the pleasure principle, the optimum tension will be sought” (SVII:52). This optimum keeps us from a full disclosure of our Thing and enables us to “maintain the distance” (SVII:58), to search for pleasure drifting from signifier to signifier that never leads directly to the Thing—even though unconsciously, one searches if not *for* the Thing than at least *because* of it; although “one doesn’t find it,” Lacan must add, “only its pleasurable associations” (SVII:52).

Such associations are wrought from objects that signify some hidden resemblance with the Thing, through a play of similarities made possible by the signifier. For the signifier is distant enough from the Thing to accord with any *reality* principle that should happen to prevail and teach that certain things will *not* give us pleasure, as they are morally forbidden and thus may entail a punishment. This is why Lacan suggests that “the way in which ethical principles are formulated when they impose themselves on consciousness” “has the closest relationship to the second principle introduced by Freud, namely, the reality principle” (SVII:74).

This proximity of the principles of morality and reality is where we can also *re-find* the temptation to reinterpret “reality” in collusion with our pleasure principle, that is, to deny the parts that can tempt us, challenge us, lead us awry or make us suffer. And truth is many times the casualty here, the truth of what is *actually* real, as Nietzsche argues of “the entire phenomenon ‘Plato’” (TI X:2), Freud of the resistances to psychoanalysis, and both of the inability of many to relinquish the opiates of religion. With such opiates the reality principle is coopted by pleasure in the imaginary until what is defined as “reality” is not our best approximation to the truth but a means to cover over it—especially over the frightfully immoral Thing-like aspects that, De Kesel notes, are for Lacan *the real* but “defined as the part of ‘reality’ that fails to become integrated in the symbolic world,” insofar as the symbolic may be a “reaction formation against the overwhelming field of stimuli.”⁴⁹

The fearing of the Thing within can lead us to cover over some of the real’s *external* aspects as well—insofar as this external covering may seem to give us comfort, by buttressing our inner denials with more empirically false

beliefs. We can take, for example, how belief in the Devil may help us disavow our sexual instincts and have them come from someone else; how belief in an external Heaven and Hell, acting as postmortem reward or punishment, can help motivate us for this inner sex-negating task; or how belief in a clockwork, incorruptibly end-directed universe guided by a Sovereign Good, may help us believe we can and should be a little more clockwork and incorruptibly end-directed ourselves.

What is called "reality" here is merely fantasy as a means of pleasure, as a means of avoiding pain, as we come to what Lacan calls "the notion of a deep subjectivisation of the outside world," stemming from a tendency that "sifts" and "sieves" so that reality is only perceived "as radically selected" (SVII:47). For Lacan, a subject only "deals with select bits of reality" (SVII:47), as admission of any other can invoke the Thing that yields a *loss* of pleasure. Thus, Lacan will conclude, "In truth, we make reality out of pleasure" (SVII:225)—where "that universal, the good itself," as part of this process is not really the "object of a science" but of what may be "considered to be a phony science" (SVII:218). That our pleasure and reality principles collude in this way, so that "each one is really the correlative of the other" (SVII:74), is a key point Lacan in his *Ethics Seminar* wants to make, while stressing that this concerns "not so much the sphere of psychology" as it does "that of ethics" (SVII:35).

It concerns an ethics because to circle closer to the Thing that is forbidden by our reality principle, yet still the *real* aim of much desire, leads not so much to pleasure but to *moral* anguish of the heaviest kind. And the "realities" we construct reflect as much, as we try to deny the existence of what may come and tempt us, of what we simply fear too much. But henceforth if desire dams up, breaks the levee with a return of the Thing, this is how Lacan depicts us going *beyond* the pleasure principle, whose other name for Freud is "death-drive." It signals a *post-symbolic* sense of the real, arriving as a return of the repressed.⁵⁰

Here outside the perimeter created by our pleasure-reality principles is what Lacan calls "the *jouissance* of transgression" (SVII:195), a *jouissance* of the real that the Thing would bring, said by Lacan to be the most direct or complete satisfaction of a drive that is possible, but to the point of self-destruction.⁵¹ This is why Lacan senses that "the relationship of the subject to *das Ding* is marked as bad" and leads to compromise "through the symptom" (SVII:74), one perhaps like the Good. But if this Good is *too* ascetic—or, as Lacan puts it, if its aim is to serve "human defence" and a "lying about evil" so that "at the level of the unconscious, the subject lies" (SVII:73)—it can only repress desire toward a further pathological outcome.

Lacan held Freud's realism to show that "there is nothing in common between the satisfaction a *jouissance* affords in its original state and that which

it gives in the indirect or even sublimated forms that civilisation obliges it to assume” (SVII:200). But it is Lacan who introduces the term *jouissance* to refer to this enjoyment or satisfaction of a drive that goes *beyond* our pleasure-reality principles, whereupon we reach our moment of transgression.

It suggests for Lacan our periodical propensity to “trample sacred laws underfoot” (SVII:195), as excessive as the terms *death-drive* and *beyond the pleasure principle* imply, which is why he notes that it can be unconsciously masochistic—like the criminally perverse deeds Freud saw as being only *preliminarily* sadistic before eventually expressing themselves as an “unconscious need for punishment,” where a hidden “sense of guilt” finally “finds expression.”⁵² But for Ons when Nietzsche infers that the ascetic Good leads people “to repudiate what is natural in them” because, in part, “they have derived some enjoyment from it,” this also brings him “together with Lacan” in referring to “a pleasure beyond the pleasure principle”⁵³—where, as Nietzsche put it, “pleasure is felt and *sought* in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation . . . self-flagellation” (GM III:11).

Punishing consequences can always come of transgression, as going beyond usual principles of pleasure reality often will entail risk. But if we also are feeling guilty about it, even when things remain at the level of repressed wishes, we may yet still seek to pay the price in this peculiar masochistic way referred to as well. This can be so if, blinded by the Good, we are unknowingly causing the Thing to be actualised beyond our pleasure-reality principles and self-awareness, such that transgression casts its shadow deep into an unconscious that, thanks to the Good, we know next to nothing about and refuse to acknowledge as our own.

Lacan’s *Seminar VII* shows that ignorance of the Thing yields results too damaging to accept. But abreast of a genealogy of the Good from this combined Nietzsche–Lacan analysis, we can grasp how such a Good as we find in Platonism, including Aristotle’s version, only causes more of the very problems it is meant to solve. This is not to say that our aim will become to blindly obey or *force* the real, which, as Zupančič points out, would be to take the real “as a kind of substitute, as a kind of modern equivalent of the notion of supreme Good that must be realised at any price.”⁵⁴ Rather, the aim is to increase our awareness of the real and realize that there is no cosmic Good to automatically sublimate it for us—and that such a Good, with the denials it involves, will only cause more repression that, besides mass neurosis, will lead us to externalize in more criminally extreme forms of perversion when the real returns.

In the next chapter I consider if the creative process of *sublimation*, as Lacan and Nietzsche theorize it, offers a way out of the dangers of repression that also avoids externalizing criminally perverse destruction. I do so to see if

a combined Nietzsche–Lacan analysis of sublimation produces a better ethical strategy than the world of the Good of hitherto metaphysics.

That is why when we ask what is beyond the barrier erected by the structure of the world of the good, when we ask where is the point on which this world of the good turns—as we wait for it to drag us to our destruction, our question has a meaning that you would do well to remember has a terrifying relevance.

—Lacan, Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*,
May 18, 1960