Chapter 1

Context

Sigmund Freud had the most influence on Lacan's thinking. Lacan's debt to Freud is evident throughout everything that he says and writes. Freud's theorization of the unconscious in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 strikes Lacan as a great philosophical event, one that he would try to develop and keep alive. The discovery of the unconscious gives psychoanalysis its philosophical importance.

For both Freud and Lacan, the unconscious is an agency in the psyche that evades our attempts at conscious control. The unconscious is not just what we aren't conscious of at any moment but what is irreducible to consciousness. It follows a logic distinct from consciousness that we cannot integrate into conscious thought processes. We can become aware of the unconscious – this is what psychoanalysis strives for – but we cannot intentionally think unconsciously. It takes us by surprise because it pushes us in directions that we wouldn't consciously want and that we might even find repulsive. A slip of the tongue might, for instance, reveal that I unconsciously favor one of my children over the other. I don't consciously intend to say *Hannah* instead of *Rene*, but the unconscious makes itself manifest despite my intentions. While it is disruptive to consciousness, the concept of the unconscious provides a compelling way of understanding both our subjectivity and the social order, when we pay attention to it. The importance of the unconscious draws Lacan to psychoanalysis.

Lacan illustrates how Freud's conception of the unconscious, unbeknownst to Freud himself, actually reveals itself as an effect of language. This leads Lacan to one of his most well-known pronouncements, which he repeats in slightly different ways. It receives its canonical form in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963–1964*, where he states, "*the unconscious is structured like a language*."[1] The point is not that the unconscious is language but that it bears the imprint of language. It emerges through the points where language malfunctions, through what cannot be said. Psychoanalysis pays attention to gaps and failures.

But when Lacan became interested in psychoanalysis in the 1930s, something was amiss in the field that he felt the need to correct. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud divided the psyche into the consciousness (what we aware of at this moment), the preconscious (what we could recall without difficulty), and the unconscious (what we cannot make conscious). This became known as the topographical model of the psyche, but in the early 1920s, things in the psychoanalytic world underwent a dramatic change. Freud developed a structural model of the psyche to supplement the topographical model. This new model split the psyche into the id, the ego, and the superego. Freud added the structural model because he sensed the inability of the topographical model to explain all the psychic phenomena that he encountered. He meant it as a supplement to his earlier view. But the structural theory quickly gained adherents and thoroughly displaced the topographical theory among most psychoanalytic thinkers and among the public. It allowed psychoanalysts and lay people to discuss the psyche while avoiding the disruptiveness of the unconscious, which subtracted the most important idea from the theory. This is where Lacan intervened.

One might profitably interpret Lacan's emergence as a response to the deleterious effects associated with this turn to the structural theory, effects that were directly not the fault of Freud himself but of followers too eager to escape the radicality of the initial psychoanalytic discovery. These psychoanalysts practicing in Freud's wake took the image of a healthy ego as the ideal that could animate psychoanalytic treatment. Psychoanalysis became a treatment aimed at normalizing patients and adjusting them to the social reality. Building up the patient's ego, so the thinking went, would lead to a more profitable existence in society.

The psychoanalytic investment in the ego betrayed the discovery inherent in the topographical theory that defined psychoanalysis as a project – that of the unconscious. The unconscious follows a different logic than consciousness, a logic that embraces contradictions rather than dissolving them, that leads to destruction rather than construction, and that aims at failure rather than success. When the unconscious manifests itself, our conscious plans go awry. The unconscious plays out a drama that cannot be integrated into consciousness. All we can do is try to take stock of it. Although Freud himself continued to focus on the unconscious after the introduction of the structural theory, many of his adherents marginalized it in favor of the ego. By doing so, they turned psychoanalysis into just another form of therapy designed to integrate patients back into the confines of capitalist society's norms. Lacan's return to Freud began as an attempt to place the unconscious back at the center of the psychoanalytic project.[2]

Lacan's early essays often come back to a single note: The ego cannot be the bedrock of psychoanalytic treatment because it is an imaginary entity. There is no such thing as a healthy ego that the analyst can shore up. The psychoanalysts that attempt to support the patient's ego end up pushing the patient toward an imaginary illusion rather than facilitating any type of cure. This version of psychoanalysis – commonly known as ego psychology – not only fails, but it points the subject in a conformist direction alien to the fundamental insights of psychoanalysis.

Lacan reacts against the conformism that predominates in psychoanalytic practice in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He even identifies an ethical dimension of psychoanalysis that pushes against the conformity that he sees operative in so many other analysts. He makes this clear in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, where he states, "There's absolutely no reason why we should make ourselves the guarantors of the bourgeois dream. A little more rigor and firmness are required in our confrontation with the human condition."[3] Lacan's early aim is to turn psychoanalysis back into a practice that discovers the subject's singularity rather than encouraging adaptation to oppressive norms.

The critique of the ego that dominates Lacan's early psychoanalytic theorizing takes the structure of signification as its starting point. As Lacan sees it, the mediation of the symbolic order displaces the ego from the center of the subject's experience. Focus on the ego leads psychoanalysts and their patients to miss the role that the symbolic order plays in structuring the subject. To imagine oneself identical with one's ego is to miss how the unconscious, which emerges from signification, constantly undermines the ego's authority. Through his emphasis on the structuring priority of the symbolic order, Lacan builds on Freud's claim that "*the ego is not master in its own house*."[4] When psychoanalysis focuses on the ego, it misses the society that lays down the strictures in which the ego remains confined.

When it comes to thinking about society in psychoanalytic terms, no one looms as a more important figure than Lacan. This includes Freud himself, the founder of psychoanalysis. As the founder, Freud obviously has an outsized significance for every direction that psychoanalytic theory takes. Without Freud's groundbreaking innovations, Lacan's contributions would not be possible. Specifically, Freud introduces the unconscious, which enables theorists to recognize how people might act contrary to their conscious will and their self-interest. This provides a new direction for thinking about social relations, one that eschews recourse to the struggle for power on the one hand or the pursuit of the good on the other. For Freud, the priority of the unconscious drives societies to undermine their

own power and to threaten their own good. There is a theory of how the social order functions lurking within Freud's thought, but developing this theory is not Freud's primary concern.[5]

When he originates psychoanalysis, Freud focuses on the individual in relation to others whom it desires. The individual psyche is Freud's starting point. Although Freud speculates about the social background of the psyche, the specific role that the social structure plays in constituting it does not play a central part in his theory. He takes the individual psyche as the point of departure for developing his original conception of psychoanalysis. But Lacan makes the radical gesture of socializing Freud's thought, framing the psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity in terms of how the social structure imprints itself on the subject through language.[6] He doesn't do this as a critique of Freud but as a development of Freud's thought.[7] Lacan takes up subjectivity as the fundamental problem, subjectivity that emerges through the signifying effect of language.

The signifying structure of language is distinct from culture. Culture uses signifiers but arranges them so that they appear to have a substantial meaning. Culture gives the illusion of a grounded identity that the signifier doesn't. Lacan is not a culturalist who believes that our specific culture makes us what we are. He is not concerned with how cultural influences imprint themselves on subjectivity, with how they produce particular tastes or proclivities that are specific to a social situation. He doesn't reduce subjectivity to the effects of the culture in which it emerges or the historical period that contains it. As Lacan sees it, thinking this way amounts to a psychoanalytic heresy. His focus on socializing psychoanalysis occurs entirely through the structure of signification, a structure he theorizes as separate from the influence of culture. Culture promises us that we can be part of it and fit in, while signifiers constantly confront us with our inability to fully identify ourselves with them. Unlike culture, signification occasions a rupture that leaves the subject divided from itself and unable to achieve any self-identity. Culture promises to give us an undivided identity, but the very signification of that identity results in a subject divided from itself.

Lacan emphasizes the linguistic background of subjectivity to such an extent that he theorizes subjectivity primarily in terms of its relationship to the signifier. The subject for Lacan is the subject of the signifier. Subjectivity does not exist prior to the relationship that it has to the signifying order. This order enables the subject to relate to itself – it makes self-consciousness possible – but it also introduces an obstacle into the subject's self-relation. This obstacle is the unconscious. Lacan sees the conception of the unconscious as Freud's lasting theoretical contribution. The unconscious is the sine

qua non of psychoanalysis. In a way that remains only implicit in Freud's thinking, Lacan locates the unconscious at the juncture of animality and the signifying structure.

In Lacan's way of conceiving it, psychoanalysis wrestles with the results of the collision that takes place between the instincts of the human animal and the structure of signification. This collision is more violent than a highspeed crash on the highway. In its aftermath, the instincts of the human animal become unrecognizable. They become the unconscious drives of the subject, an entity forever divorced from its animal origin. Psychoanalysis doesn't discover the animal within the human but how the structure of signification deforms this animal into an inhuman subject. Lacan contends that the unconscious is not our hidden animal instincts but an effect of the separation from animality.

This deformed animal or inhuman subject has a skewed relationship to the social order within which it exists. The collision between the biological entity and the structure of signification produces a subject that doesn't belong to the social order but sticks out from it. The deformed status of subjectivity separates it from the coercive power of society. The subject is not just the whim of social forces that constitute it. Lacan focuses on subjection to the signifier in order to distinguish the subject from the socially constituted symbolic identity. The split between the lacking subject of the signifier and the symbolic identity that fills in this lack with some social content is fundamental. Everyone must wrestle with this conflict. No one is a pure subject, and no one can attain a pure symbolic identity.

Subjectivity is a form without any content. Symbolic identity provides a content. It fills the gap within desiring subjectivity by supplying what subjectivity lacks. A series of signifiers comes together to constitute symbolic identity. In contrast to the lack of any foundation that characterizes subjectivity, symbolic identity offers points of anchorage. Signifiers of symbolic identity include nationality, economic status, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, career, and even attractiveness. The subject can tell itself that it is a German, that it is wealthy, that it is a dentist, that it is a heterosexual, and so on. These signifiers offer symbolic answers to the question of subjectivity, but these answers are only symbolic.

No matter how ardently I identify with some aspect of my symbolic identity, my subjectivity always exceeds it. Another way of understanding the unconscious is as the name that psychoanalytic theory gives to this mismatch between subjectivity and symbolic identity. The unconscious manifests itself through our inability to reduce subjectivity to the markers of identity. The harder I try to see myself as German, for example, the more

this effort itself betrays the absence of identity with the signifier. The moment I assert a symbolic identity for myself, just as quickly I avow my failure to be it fully. If I have to say it, my statement reveals that I am not identical with what I claim for myself. True self-identity would have to go unsaid. It could not even be thought. Because identity is always articulated through the signifier, the subject always remains alien to it.

This is evident in a joke about a terrible golfer. After finishing an especially poor round, the disappointed golfer takes out his frustration on his caddie. He says, "You must be the worst caddie in the world." The caddie responds, "No, I don't think so. That would be too much of a coincidence." Here, the golfer identifies the caddie as the source for his own inadequacy as a golfer. He does so to shore up his own symbolic identity as a golfer and avoid confronting his lacking subjectivity. But the caddie corrects him, pointing out the golfer hasn't rightly recognized who is the failure and who is the innocent bystander.

The key to the joke lies in what is not said: The caddie doesn't just state directly that the golfer is terrible. Instead, he makes this point indirectly through a comment on his own ability as a caddie. This unspoken evaluation indicates the unconscious status of the golfer's subjectivity and its distance from the symbolic identity he claims for himself. Thanks to the unconscious, every subject is in the position of this golfer – asserting a symbolic identity out of step with the subject itself. We all consciously think we're good golfers derailed by bad caddies, but the unconscious knows better. The caddie in this joke gives voice to the unconscious, which is why he must speak elliptically rather than directly. The assertion of symbolic identity always misses subjectivity because it cannot account for the distortion that the unconscious introduces.

The distinction between the subject and its identity allows us to recognize what separates Lacan from the theory of social construction. For the constructionist, subjectivity and identity are the same. One is nothing outside of one's symbolic identity, which the historical situation determines. According to this position, if I live in a historical epoch structured around hierarchies, I will think in terms of hierarchy.[8] If I live in a capitalist society, I will think like a capitalist. There is no possibility for a break within the epoch, only a break between one epoch and the following one. There is no subject that exists in a disjunctive relationship to the social order that constitutes it. This constructivist view reduces every subject to its social place. But according to Lacan, subjectivity can never find a place within society. An emphasis on the failure of the subject to fit in its society establishes the groundwork for Lacan's philosophical system.[9]

The emphasis that Lacan places on the social order enables him to grasp the philosophical bearing of psychoanalysis in a way that Freud cannot. Lacan often characterizes himself as a faithful interpreter of Freud who advocates a return to Freud. But Lacan's return adds a philosophical dimension to psychoanalytic theory that Freud himself never fully worked out. Throughout his seminars, Lacan elaborates a theory of the subject in relation to the social order that goes beyond anything Freud could articulate. Although as a youth Freud aspired to become a philosopher, he takes pains to separate psychoanalysis as a science from philosophical speculation. For Freud, philosophy struggles with a fundamental uncertainty about its claims that psychoanalytic thinking can overcome due to its scientific bent. As a result of his investment in the experimental work of psychoanalysis as a proving ground for his ideas, Freud believes that psychoanalysis can approach nearer and nearer to the status of a science. Ultimately, he hopes that it will attain a position next to sciences such as physics and biology. Lacan gives up this dream of establishing psychoanalysis as a scientific mode of inquiry in favor of asserting its philosophical significance. Freud's inability to recognize the parallels between psychoanalytic inquiry and philosophical thought stems from his lack of knowledge of philosophy. Lacan makes up for this lacuna.

Lacan is a psychoanalytic philosopher. In contrast to Freud, Lacan engages himself seriously with the history of Western philosophy. His seminars discuss various philosophical figures as much as they do Freud himself and much more than they do other psychoanalysts. Lacan's interlocutors are René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, and Baruch Spinoza, not so much psychoanalysts like Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and Melanie Klein.

The majority of the attendees at Lacan's seminars were psychoanalysts or fledgling psychoanalysts. When he gave the seminars, he wasn't just trying to construct a theory of subjectivity but to train analysts in a specific practice of psychoanalysis. In fact, despite his philosophical orientation, Lacan explicitly resists taking up the mantle of the philosopher of psychoanalysis.[10] He sees himself as a psychoanalyst who teaches others about the practice. But his concerns are also philosophical ones. He engages in philosophical speculation every bit as much as his contemporaries Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Lacan announces his respect for the philosophical tradition in *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, a respect that he conceives in opposition to the intellectual trends of the midcentury. It had become fashionable to declare philosophical authors passé, their positions no longer relevant in the contemporary world. Lacan has none

of this. He tells those attending his seminar, "I don't much like hearing that we have *gone beyond* Hegel, the way one hears we have *gone beyond* Descartes. We go beyond everything and always end up in the same place."[11] Instead of going beyond figures such as Descartes and Hegel, Lacan attempts to further their conception of subjectivity through recourse to the discoveries of psychoanalysis. Lacan's implicit wager is that psychoanalysis gives him a path to extend the philosophy of subjectivity. Insofar as he is a philosopher, he is a philosopher of the subject.

Subjectivity is a nodal point for modern Western philosophy beginning with René Descartes. Appropriately, Lacan's theorization of subjectivity takes Descartes as its point of departure. Although Descartes doesn't use the term *subject*, he is the first to theorize subjectivity as the beginning of philosophical inquiry, which leads him to claim, "I think, therefore I am."[12] He starts his philosophy with radical doubt, the questioning of all his assumptions about himself and the world, even his own sense perceptions. Both our senses and our minds deceive us all the time, which leads Descartes to install doubt as his philosophical starting point. Descartes doesn't doubt for the sake of doubting – he is not a skeptic – but in order to attain certitude. He wonders what he can be certain about if he casts doubt on everything that our senses and our minds lead us to believe.

Doubt leads to certitude because one has certainty that one doubts. Even at the moment that one doubts everything, one remains aware of oneself as a thinking subject doing the doubting. For Descartes, there is no act of doubting possible without a thinking subject who doubts. This is why we can be certain of our existence on the basis of knowing that we are thinking. The act of doubting and the certainty it provides generate subjectivity in Descartes's philosophy. The Cartesian subject is a subject of doubt. The discovery of this subject is Descartes's great breakthrough.

Taking up radical doubt as the basis for the discovery of certainty links Descartes with psychoanalytic thinking. Freud also proceeds through doubt to discover where subjectivity emerges. For Descartes, doubt enables us to attain certitude about the thinking subject. For Freud, doubt reveals the influence of unconscious desire. When doubt intervenes in the recollection of a dream, this is how consciousness resists – and reveals – unconscious desire. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes, "Doubt whether a dream or certain of its details have been correctly reported is once more a derivative of the dream-censorship, of resistance to the penetration of the dream-thoughts into consciousness."[13] Doubting details of the dream underlines the presence of unconscious desire in these details. Doubt about what happens in the dream expresses to Freud the certainty of the subject's unconscious desire in what

the subject doubts. The psychoanalytic method prioritizes the subject's doubts because they evince ripples in consciousness where the unconscious manifests itself. Although Freud does not recognize the parallel with Descartes, Lacan does. According to Lacan, Freud's sense of the importance of doubt in recounting the dream reveals that the subject at work in psychoanalysis is the same subject that Descartes discovers in his philosophy.[14]

Descartes doesn't discover the subject by assuming it as his philosophical starting point but by questioning everything that seems certain. Descartes directs his philosophical inquiry through radical doubt, which enables him to grasp that the subject finds itself only at the point where it loses itself. This anticipates the psychoanalytic discovery of the subject's unconscious. The unconscious marks the point at which the subject is at home in what appears most foreign to it. To theorize the subject through the unconscious, Lacan must see the connection from Descartes, but he also must pass through Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, his two primary philosophical touchstones.

As figures within the movement known as German Idealism (which began in 1781 when Kant wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason* and ended in 1831 when Hegel died), Kant and Hegel theorize the connection between subject and object by bridging the gap between them. They don't do this in either of the ways that we might suspect. The idealist tack would reduce the object to the subject by rejecting the existence of any external objects outside the subject. All would exist within our act of perceiving.[15] In contrast, the materialist gesture would reduce the subject to the object and view the subject as nothing but another object. According to this theory, the problem of how we access objects never arises because there is no subject to struggle with this question.[16] Despite the name, German Idealism avoids the facile solutions of both idealism and materialism.

Prior to the revolution of German Idealism, philosophers conceive of the subject on one side and the object on the other of a fundamental divide. There are subjects in the world with objects external to them. Through this oppositional understanding, subjects come to know objects by reaching out and grasping them through the act of knowing. Despite this outreach on the part of the subject, at no point does the opposition between subject and object break down. It is only with Kant's theorization of the subject in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that this changes.

Even though he mentions Kant less than Descartes or Hegel, Lacan is first and foremost a psychoanalytic Kantian, which is why grasping Lacan's thought requires looking briefly at the contours of Kant's theoretical philosophy. There is a clear parallel between Kant's conception of subjectivity and

Lacan's. Both view subjectivity as the vehicle for understanding the world while at the same time the limit that restricts our understanding.

Objects become accessible for the subject, Kant believes, because the structure of subjectivity makes them accessible. There is no simple or immediate apprehension of objects that doesn't occur through the structure of accessibility in the subject. Instead, in Kant's theory, subjectivity has a form of apprehension that makes all objects available to it. This structure will provide the basic model for Lacan to construct his own theory of the subject.[17] Kant divides subjectivity into three faculties that regulate the subject's access to objects: the sensibility, the understanding, and reason. Perceptions occur through the sensibility, while the understanding organizes these perceptions into a meaningful structure. Reason stops the understanding from indulging in misleading speculative excesses. Lacan's version of these faculties is the three registers of imaginary, symbolic, and real.

In Kant's philosophy, the sensibility allows the subject to perceive sense impressions by structuring them through space and time. The framing structure of space and time opens up access to sense impressions by limiting them to a specific spatiotemporal form. If we lacked the strictures of spatiality and temporality, our sense impressions would lose their coherence and no longer be conducive to meaning. There would be no possibility of ordering our sense impressions in any meaningful fashion. We would be unable to distinguish between what happened earlier and what happened later, between what was near and what was far. Our sense impressions would remain a complete jumble without the form of space and time that the sensibility provides. We can make sense of what we sense because there are clear limits – those of space and time – that govern how our perception works. This is Kant's theory of the sensibility, our first faculty of knowing.

The same thing occurs with the understanding, which is the second faculty. The understanding orders sense impressions that the sensibility produces in a conceptual apparatus. Kant contends that the understanding has categories that organize all the spatial and temporal sense data that we take in. These categories dramatically confine our experience to preestablished laws such as that of causality. Nothing in our understanding can violate the law of causality: The understanding assures us that there is no event that occurs without a cause driving it. The law of causality governs all our experiences. Just as in the case of the sensibility, this limit on the understanding is generative. The limit that the categories provide allows us to access the mass of sense data in an orderly fashion.

The last faculty, for Kant, is reason. Unlike the sensibility and the understanding, each of which play a productive role in our knowing, reason is