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The Cambridge Introduction to
Jacques Lacan

The difficulty of Jacques Lacan's thought is notorious. *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Lacan* cuts through this difficulty to provide a clear, jargon-free approach to understanding it. The book describes Lacan's life, the context from which he emerged, and the reception of his theory. Readers will come away with an understanding of concepts such as jouissance, the *objet a*, and the big Other. The book frames Lacan's thought in the history of philosophy and explains it through jokes, films, and popular culture. In this light, Lacan becomes a thinker of philosophical importance in his own right, on a par with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Lacan's great contribution is the introduction of the unconscious into subjectivity, which results in a challenge to both the psychoanalytic establishment and to philosophers. *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Lacan* provides readers with a way of understanding the nature of Lacan's contribution.

Todd McGowan teaches theory and film at the University of Vermont. He is the author of *Embracing Alienation*, *The Racist Fantasy*, *Emancipation After Hegel*, *Capitalism and Desire*, *Only a Joke Can Save Us*, and other works. He is also the cohost of the *Why Theory* podcast with Ryan Engley.

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In memory of Mari Ruti,
a singular being

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Preface

Jacques Lacan is the most misunderstood theorist of the twentieth century. The problem of understanding him begins with the fact that he never published one central book laying out his doctrine, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* or Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Access to his thought was possible only through the occasional essays that he wrote and the limited diffusion of the seminars that he gave starting in 1953 and continuing to the end of his life in 1981. He didn't write a major book articulating his theory because he considered publication primarily a vehicle for misunderstanding, not understanding.

Lacan was fond of calling publication "*poubellication*," a neologism that works in French to bring together publication with garbage. A *poubelle* is a trash can. The use of the portmanteau *poubellication* indicates Lacan's derision for publication due to the way that readers typically approach books as commodities to be consumed (and then discarded in the trash) rather than as challenges to be wrestled with. Despite this disdain, Lacan did not completely forswear producing a written form of his work for the public.

Beginning in the 1930s, Lacan wrote a series of essays that he published in a variety of venues. The most important of these came to constitute his collected writings known as the *Écrits*, which just means "writings" in French. The collection appeared in print in 1966.[1] This one book publication makes no attempt to bring coherence to the essays that Lacan wrote in different times and contexts. They do not hold together to articulate a systematic doctrine but reflect the occasional manner in which Lacan wrote them. What's more, when Lacan wrote essays, he employed an idiosyncratic style.

The misunderstanding surrounding Lacan stems not just from the absence of a major written work or the nonsystematic form of the *Écrits*. It is also the product of his own obfuscatory style. The difficulty of Lacan's style is not an accident or the product of a lack of skill. Lacan's sensitivity to the reception of Freud's thought informed both his opposition to publication and the stylistic choice in his writing. As Lacan saw it, the directness of Freud's prose allowed readers to understand his point too quickly and thus not fully engage with its

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disruptiveness. Thanks to Freud's accessible style, followers easily assimilated his theoretical innovations to already existing positions. Lacan vowed not to make the same mistake himself. He believed that writing forbidding prose would hinder attempts to reduce his ideas to preexisting formulas and demand instead careful engagement.[2] His aim was to prevent readers from understanding too quickly so as to avoid thinking fully and questioning their own preconceptions.[3]

With the perspective of several decades, we can safely judge this project to be a failure. Rather than preventing facile misunderstandings with tortuous prose that demanded attentive reading, Lacan ended up making himself even more misunderstood than Freud had been. As a result of the stylistic choice that Lacan made in his written work, understanding Lacan's philosophy requires turning from his written work to the seminars that he gave. Focusing solely only on what Lacan wrote and not on his oral seminars makes it impossible to grasp his philosophical project.

Without question, Lacan disseminated his most important – and most lucid – ideas orally in his seminars, not in written form. This was the result of a conscious decision on his part, a decision that had extreme ramifications for how both contemporaries and subsequent generations would receive his thought. While the seminars were much more accessible than the written essays, they were for a long time also unavailable to the public. Only a privileged inner circle who attended the seminars or who obtained typescripts of them were able to interact with this primary dimension of Lacan's thought.[4] Although his son-in-law and literary executor Jacques-Alain Miller began to publish the seminars toward the end of Lacan's life, important seminars remained unpublished even forty years after his death. During Lacan's lifetime and immediately after, the arcane formulations of the written doctrine dominated the perception of his philosophy.[5] The result was a widespread misperception.

In addition to the difficulties in understanding that Lacan's prose causes, his emphasis on language creates further problems. He uses the term *symbolic order* rather than just discussing *language* and refers to *signifiers* rather than *words* in order to focus on the breadth of the impact that this order has on us. The symbolic order is the order of language but also includes the different values assigned to identities. The symbolic identity that organizes our social existence is more than just our name but includes profession, education, class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and everything else that goes into how we identify ourselves. The signifiers that make up the symbolic order underwrite all social existence. Words are signifiers, but so are the clothes we wear, the hairstyle we

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have, and the type of food we eat. The symbolic order with its mass of signifiers defines the social terrain, even going so far as to indicate to us how we should navigate it.

The symbolic order – the order of language – plays an outsized role in Lacan's system. It provides the basis both for his critique of other psychoanalysts and for the philosophical impact of his thinking. Lacan theorizes the subject as the product of the imposition of the symbolic order on the human animal. He tends to use the term *subject* for what we might call a *person* or *human* to indicate that we are first and foremost speaking beings caught up in the process of signification, a universe of meaning that informs everything in our lives. The subject is neither a biological entity nor a social one. It is the result of the collision between the human animal and the social order. This collision produces unconscious desires that are distinct from animal instincts and from social determinations. The subject doesn't exist prior to its encounter with the signifier but is a subject of the signifier. A signifier is a word or any element within the symbolic order that conveys meaning.

This emphasis on signification leads to misunderstanding because it prompts people to assume that Lacan is a social constructionist, someone who believes that we are just what our society makes of us. Social constructionism draws a straight line from the social structure that we live within to our actions, our words, and even our thoughts. It credits society, rather than biology or our own choices, with making us what we are. This is not Lacan's position. Although the encounter with the symbolic order produces subjectivity, the symbolic order does not determine the subject. This is a key distinction. Subjectivity, according to Lacan, is not just an effect of language – it is not socially constructed – but what emerges at the point where signification fails, where the symbolic order isn't determinative. But for many years, it became commonplace to view Lacan as a thinker who undermined the notion of the subject through drawing attention to the power of the signifier. This was an error with unfortunate consequences for making sense of Lacan's project.

According to this doxa, subjectivity is nothing but a construction of the symbolic order in Lacan's philosophy. The symbolic order imposes certain desires on us. We believe that we are free agents acting out our conscious will, but what we desire is just the effect of the signifiers that structure this desire on our behalf. As Kaja Silverman puts it in *The Subject of Semiotics*, "Lacan indicates that the subject's desires are manufactured for it. The factory – the site of production – is the symbolic."[6] Silverman views Lacan's theory as a referendum on the ultimate power of the signifying structure over those caught within its grasp. For instance, according to this way of thinking about

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Lacan, I believe that I seek out a new television because of my own private desire, but I am just playing out the desire that the capitalist symbolic order has given to me. Whatever symbolic order we live within determines what we desire. Lacan allows us to recognize these determinations. The problem with this position on Lacan lies in the relationship between the symbolic order and the subject that it assumes.

Given the way that reference to the symbolic order dominates Lacan's thinking, this misunderstanding is itself readily comprehensible, especially for those considering him solely or primarily through his written work. But according to Lacan, subjectivity is not reducible to an effect of the symbolic order. Although this order produces the subject, it doesn't do so in a direct fashion. The symbolic order issues a demand. The subject is a subject and not a pure product of the symbolic order because it never responds to this demand properly. Every demand goes awry when the subject interprets it, and this interpretation is the subject's desire. The symbolic order may demand that I purchase a television, but my desire might respond by turning to books rather than the television – even books that challenge the society of consumption. In contrast to what Silverman claims, unconscious desire stems from the failure of the symbolic order's imposition of a demand on the subject. To desire is always to desire askew from the demand articulated in the signifier.

Despite a desire that doesn't coincide with social demands, the subject still makes strenuous efforts to conform. The disjunction between the symbolic order and the subject opens the space for a radical unconscious desire, but it also leads the subject to yearn to find a place for itself within the symbolic order. Every subject experiences its disjunction from the symbolic order as a wound that it tries to heal by aligning itself with a symbolic identity. One tries to really become a police officer or a judge or even a criminal in order to have a place, but subjectivity cannot ever fully overcome its displacement, its inability to belong to the symbolic order. To be a subject is to be riven between one's unconscious desire and the symbolic identity that promises respite from this desire. For Lacan, there is no solution to this split other than living with it.

Subjectivity is our inescapable problem. Lacan stands out from all forms of constructivism through the privileged position that subjectivity has in his philosophy. He contrasts subjectivity and symbolic identity in a way that social constructivism doesn't. Lacan is first and foremost a theorist of the subject. Rather than trying to dismantle the philosophical tradition that focuses on subjectivity, Lacan integrates the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious into this philosophizing.

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Lacan's emphasis on subjectivity separates him from the thinkers often mistakenly grouped with him, typically under the moniker *poststructuralism*. People tend to use this term to refer to a group of French thinkers including Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan. This term, one invented in the United States and not used by any of the theorists themselves, papers over dramatic conflicts between them that makes any grouping of them impossible. It is a term that should not be used because it creates needless confusion. But if there is one idea that these supposed poststructuralists hold in common – an idea that would bridge the sometimes bitter opposition between Derrida and Foucault, for instance – it would be the critique of subjectivity. With the stark exception of Lacan, these thinkers tend to see the subject as a theoretical dead end that has entrapped Western philosophy. From this perspective, to invest oneself in the idea of subjectivity is to succumb to a myth perpetuated by the Enlightenment and its adherents.

Although Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault disagree with each other, sometimes even vehemently, what links them together is their shared critique of the subject. They launch this criticism in different ways, but each of them insists on it.[7] Lacan believes that giving up on the subject would be akin to theorizing away the unconscious. It is the unconscious that alienates us from what the symbolic order would make of us. Subjectivity indicates the ability to be other than what one was made to be, an ability that we have thanks to the unconscious, which is the point at which we do not know ourselves. Psychoanalysis intervenes at this point not to know our unconscious but to help us find a way of relating to it, of recognizing its impact.

The task of introducing Lacan involves traversing a labyrinth of misunderstandings, many of which Lacan himself introduced intentionally to make things even more tortuous. Although it's tempting with a difficult thinker who strives to render his prose as arduous as possible to dismiss him as unintelligible and move on to those who express themselves clearly, Lacan is worth the time that it takes to work one's way through all the misunderstandings. One can reject his stylistic choices – I believe that we must – while still granting the perspicuity of his central insights. Fewer people today should try to write like Lacan, but more people today should pay attention to his thought. His unsurpassed originality lies in offering a reconception of subjectivity that integrates the unconscious into it without eliminating the subject's freedom. Lacan is a philosopher of the subject who avoids the Scylla of biologism and the Charybdis of culturalism. This is what makes him worth the trouble.

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1 A selection of the *Écrits* first appeared in English in 1977. In France, a subsequent compilation of his writings came out posthumously in 2001 with the title *Autres écrits*. In 2023, another posthumous volume appeared that collected his earliest writing. It is entitled, appropriately enough, *Premiers écrits*. The writing in the work predates Lacan's turn to psychoanalysis and reflects his position as a psychiatrist.

2 The intervening years have made Lacan's written works more accessible, not because his prose miraculously became more intelligible on its own but because a group of Lacanian thinkers collected a series of commentaries that provided a meticulous reading of each essay published in the *Écrits*. Anyone invested in Lacan's thought owes an immense debt to Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill. See Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill, *Reading Lacan's Écrits from "The Signification of the Phallus" to "Metaphor of the Subject"* (London: Routledge, 2018); Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill, *Reading Lacan's Écrits from "The Freudian Thing" to "Remarks on Daniel Lagache"* (London: Routledge, 2019); and Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill, *Reading Lacan's Écrits from "Logical Time" to "Response to Jean Hyppolite"* (London: Routledge, 2022). To give an idea of how difficult Lacan's written work is, two of the contributors to these volumes, tasked with writing an essay explaining one of Lacan's articles, ended up writing a book-length treatment that had to be published in a different form because its length so exceeded the limits of a standard essay. This shows that sometimes it takes a whole book to explain a twenty-five-page article, at least when Jacques Lacan has written it. That said, both books are invaluable contributions to understanding not just the particular essay they discuss but also Lacan's theory in general. See Adrian Johnston, *Irrepressible Truth: On Lacan's "The Freudian Thing"* (London: Palgrave, 2017), and Dany Nobus, *The Law of Desire: On Lacan's "Kant with Sade"* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

3 Lacan makes this point to those attending his seminar on several occasions. For instance, while going over the ethics of psychoanalysis, he tells his auditors, "I have always told you that it is important not to understand for the sake of understanding." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992 [1986]), 278. Although Lacan says this in an oral seminar, it is primarily in his writing that he attempts to forestall understanding through an unapproachable style.

4 The members of the audience at Lacan's seminars were primarily psychoanalysts. He thought of himself as first and foremost someone introducing others into the practice of psychoanalysis. This will not be my focus here. There are, however, several excellent introductions to the practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis. See especially Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Dany Nobus, *Jacques Lacan and the Freudian Practice of Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2000).

5 Typically, a thinker's esoteric work given to the inner circle is more difficult than the exoteric work available to the general public. Lacan reverses this structure, which leads to lasting difficulties in the widespread dissemination of his thought. In Lacan's case, the esoteric texts are the accessible ones.

6 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 178.

7 Late in his life, Foucault takes up a more sanguine attitude toward the subject, as he turns his thought toward ancient Greece. Even here, however, Foucault's conception of the subject remains at a distance from Lacan's. He tries to consider subjectivity outside of the subjection to the symbolic law that Lacan views as necessary.

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