

On God and Gods



Les Mystères de la Passion, de la Résurrection et de l'Ascension du Christ, Antonio Campi, 1569, oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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God, Truth, Being

In his sixth seminar, Lacan asserts: “This is the big secret of psychoanalysis, if I may say so myself. The big secret is that there is no Other of the Other”.¹ The signifier is difference, negativity, a reference to another difference, and the Other, being a network of signifiers, has nothing outside of this differential interplay to refer to in order to determine the value of its constituents, and thus, by extension, of itself. In other words, in the sphere of language, something is missing: that which would enable the perpetual play of the negative to turn into an assertion of Truth. Hence, we must conclude that the Other is intrinsically incomplete, and we could conceive of this incompleteness as manifesting itself in the form of an internal void where that which could hypothetically ground it, the Other of the Other assumed to fulfill the function of the Cartesian God, is not. Accordingly, there is a differentiation between knowledge and truth, between the level of the structural overdetermination of the signifying element and the absence of ground guaranteeing the truth value of every possible articulation:

There is nothing in the Other or signifierness that can suffice at this level of signifying articulation; there is nothing in sigifierness that can guarantee truth; there is no other guarantee of truth than the Other’s good faith; and this good faith always presents itself to the subject in a problematic form. Everything that the realm of speech brings into existence for the subject continues to depend on utter and complete faith in the Other.²

In other words, the Other of the Other, understood as the hypothetical grounding-guaranteeing reference point of the whole signifying system, is nowhere to be found in language. Perhaps it could thus be argued that truth has abandoned knowledge, that the ground of truth, being an “elsewhere” which is not, is nowhere to be found; but for Lacan, this absent ground *is* present *as* absence *in* the domain of knowledge – an absence “inside” of what is not “outside” – thereby negatively contributing to its structural overdetermination. The fact that there is no guarantee of truth does not mean that every articulation is false – which would amount to an assertion of the truth about truth – but that the problem of truth must be reconceptualized in terms of the non-existence of the Other of the Other *as* effective absence. Thus, psychoanalytically speaking, we cannot evaluate any articulation in terms of truth without first listening to the resonance in and of its absent ground; but also, since every signifying articulation ultimately presupposes the functioning of the dimension of truth, that the very habitation of the *parlêtre* in language is indissolubly tied with questions of faith. Faith in what? In the possibility

of truth being spoken by language. Accordingly, and strictly speaking, insofar as speech implies faith in the possibility of truth, nothing can be said without implicitly raising the question of the ground of truth, that is, ultimately, of the existence of the Other of the Other. In his twentieth seminar, Lacan formulates it as follows:

The Other, the Other as the locus of truth, is the only place, albeit an irreducible place, that we can give to the term “divine being,” God, to call him by his name. God (*Dieu*) is the locus where, if you will allow me this wordplay, the *dieu* – the *dieur* – the *dire*, is produced. With a trifling change, the *dire* constitutes *Dieu*. And as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist. ... It is impossible to say anything without making Him subsist in the form of the Other.³

Insofar as the Other is the locus of truth, it is the locus of God, whom, although he *de facto* is *there* only as the not-there per se, is also always-already there as bearer of the function of the retroactive *a priori* of speech as such. He subsists independently of his existence or non-existence. He “functions”.

In other words, that there is no Other of the Other means that the Other, *qua* locus of truth, is incomplete and incoherent, which opens up a rift between knowledge and truth, which, albeit being definitive, does not imply the definitive loss of truth, but a transformation of its conditions of existence. The rift between knowledge and truth becomes the mark of truth as such. More specifically, truth manifests itself in the occurrence wherein the signifier disrupts the apparent truthfulness of knowledge. This is the truth of the psychoanalytic session, outlined by Freud in his canonical writings: the truth that reveals-conceals itself in the dream, the symptom, the lapse, the parapraxis – the truth that reveals itself in the open in the form of the error. The truth shows itself as error in the singular enunciation wherein the unconscious speaks through the subject, in spite of the subject, *as* the subject:

In short, error is the habitual incarnation of the truth. And if we wanted to be entirely rigorous, we would say that, as long as the truth isn’t entirely revealed, that is to say in all probability until the end of time, its nature will be to propagate itself in the form of error.⁴

Ultimately, we could say that the error, insofar as it manifests the incoherence of the dimension of knowledge, is, on the one hand, a consequence of the non-existence of the Other of the Other, and, on the other hand, precisely that which makes its existence, as ground-guarantee of the possibility of truth, necessary. If the Other of the Other truly existed, it would immediately make itself superfluous.

Further, what is it that comes to be when speech reveals the truth of desire in the form of the error? In his first seminar, after

having outlined the general structure of truth, Lacan asserts: “you don’t have to go much further to see in this a structure constitutive of the revelation of being as such”.⁵ Let us dwell upon that which ties together truth and being.

In the real, “that which always comes back to the same place”,⁶ nothing is different from what it is; “all the seats are taken”,⁷ there is no empty space which would enable rearrangements to take place. However:

Words, symbols, introduce a hollow, a hole thanks to which all manner of crossings are possible. Things become interchangeable. Depending on the way one envisions it, this hole in the real is called being or nothingness. This being and this nothingness are essentially linked to the phenomenon of speech. ... [The] revelation of speech is the realization of being.⁸

In the heart of the symbolic, the signifier creates a hole in the real, without which there would be no room for the signifier to oscillate, alternate, permute, and this hole, this nothingness, is nothing but being itself, and this being is the grounding non-ground inside-outside the symbolic, and to the region that pertains to being, to the hollow in the real in the symbolic, is thrown that which is not realized in speech, that which has been relegated to its included outside, that is, the repressed, which bears the mark of negativity which the supplement of the Other of the Other fortifies in the realm of the symbol – but being, by being a nothingness which coincides with the major lack in the heart of the symbolic, is also, given that lack is the ground of desire, nothing but the grounding non-ground of truth that grounds desire as desire for being. This is why the desire of the subject, in essence, is a *manque-à-être*, a lack of being, a want-to-be. And thus, we could say that the articulation of the signifier, by creating the non-existence of the Other of the Other *qua* God, or, otherwise stated, by creating the hollow of being, provides a place for the emergence of the error in which the truth of desire may reveal itself as the realization of the being of the subject.

The Nothing and The Negative

“Is this Heidegger?”, the attentive reader may ask himself. Yes and no. There are a couple of highly significant differences between Lacan’s perspective on being and truth and Heidegger’s conception of ἀλήθεια, of truth as the unconcealment of being of beings. In his first seminar, concerning the lie – which in this context should be taken as representing the “negativity” of the signifier – Lacan asserts:

It is precisely because it introduces what isn’t, that it can also introduce what is. Before speech, nothing either is or isn’t. Everything is already there, no doubt, but it is only with speech that there are things which are – which are true or false, that is to say which are – and things which are not. Truth hollows out its way into the real thanks to the dimension of speech. ... Speech introduces the hollow of being into the texture of the real.⁹

Without the signifier, there would be no distance between beings and “their” being; beings would be “stuck” in themselves, in a state of existence without being. There would be nothing but the real, a collection of beings that “aren’t” owing to the fact that they simply “are”. In this sense, there is neither being nor truth before speech, due to there being no nothingness which would enable beings to withdraw from “themselves”, conceal themselves in and amongst themselves,

be different from themselves, and reveal themselves as themselves in the occurrence of truth as the unconcealment of being. In the light of this, “the word is the murder of the thing” signifies that the signifier is the creation of the “loss-of-being”, of which desire is a metonymy, whereby being withdraws from beings. In other words, the signifier is the sole cause and ground of what Heidegger terms “the ontological difference”, the distinction between being and beings, by introducing the nothingness which corresponds to the abandonment of beings by being, leaving behind the “abyssal ground” of being *within* language, enabling being to disappear in the distorting perpetual interplay of signifiers, and to reappear in the midst of them, and through them, in the occurrence of truth understood as the unconcealment of being. For Lacan, it is the “not” of the signifier that creates “the nothing” in the real,¹⁰ the withdrawal of being from beings, introducing the ontological difference into the field of subjectivity, and, accordingly, the word, the murder of the thing, is the origin of being – *creatio ex nihilo*.

The very opposite stance is taken by Heidegger. In “What is Metaphysics?”, he writes:

The nothing is the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple. But with that we bring the nothing under the higher determination of the negative, viewing it, it seems, as the negated. ... Do the “not”, negatedness, and thereby negation too represent the higher determination under which the nothing falls as a particular kind of negated matter? Is the nothing given only because the “not”, i.e., negation, is given? Or is it the other way around? Are negation and the “not” given only because the nothing is given? ... We assert that the nothing is more originary than the “not” and negation.¹¹

For Heidegger, the nothing is the ground and the precondition of negation; the “negativity” of the signifier is grounded in the “nothing” in the real. They are not equiprimordial: “the nothing is the origin of negation, not vice versa”.¹² What does this mean? It means that the hole in the real is not an effect of the signifier. It is primordial, it subsists independently of language. This hole is the abandonment by being *as such*. It has no cause, no “sufficient reason”, no ground in λόγος; it is itself the ground of the negative, insofar as being has already abandoned that which speech negates, that which it perceives from its own domain as endowed with existence, namely, beings. It means that being is always-already lost, that there is always-already a rift between beings and being, a distance between beings and themselves – beings were never themselves to begin with. The negative is always-already predicated by the self-estrangement of that which it speaks of. Before it starts speaking. This “before” is absolute.

Again. What does it mean that the nothing is primordial? The nothing, being the negation of the totality of beings, is, in the light of the “not” of the ontological difference, that which is found on the other side of the rift that separates beings from being: “The nothing is the ‘not’ of beings, and is thus being, experienced from the perspective of beings”.¹³ But this Hegelian being = nothingness, which Lacan, following Sartre, reiterates, is valid *only* from the point of view of beings, and *only* insofar as being is perceived as the being *of* beings, that is, insofar as being essentially is understood as *that* which has abandoned beings. From the perspective of beings, being becomes the nothing of the abandonment – the nothingness of the murder of the thing, of the word. But it is not the same thing to speak of the being of beings and the beings *of* being,

of being as *that* which “belongs to” beings and beings as *that* which “belongs to” being – or to speak of being as *that* which “belongs to” the word and the word as *that* which “belongs to” being. The being of beings, and of words, “is” their nothing, but what becomes of this nothing if beings and words are themselves perceived as *that* which being has abandoned, that is, if we perceive this nothing from the perspective of being itself? Otherwise stated, what becomes of the hole in the real if we cease to perceive it from the perspective of the word? The immediate outcome would be the seemingly trivial – but immensely consequential – assertion, that the hole in the real *does not* essentially belong to the symbolic, but to the real, and therefore the nothing, being no longer fully appropriated by language, remains a site *for* that which pertains to being essentially, and, further, since the word can no longer be understood only as the murder of the thing, as the origin of the abandonment by being, but instead becomes *one* locus which being has abandoned, the question of the status of language must be lifted anew from the perspective of being itself. And thus, the question of truth, insofar as language is conceived of as essentially belonging to being, becomes not only a question of the unconcealment of the truth of the being = nothingness = want-to-be of the subject who speaks, but *also* a question of the truth of the speaking subject’s *essential belonging* to being – a leap from the being of the subject to the subject of being – insofar as we grant not only the signifier, but also being *itself* the capacity to conceal-unconceal itself *in the place* from which language originates, that is, in the hole in the real *insofar* as it essentially belongs to the real. This is what remains to be thought.

The Mystery and The Enigma

What is being? Being is not a being. Being “is” not. Being is not the real. The real is the realm of ex-sistence, of existence without being. Neither is being nonbeing, the hole in the real, other than from the perspective of beings. What, then, remains for being “to be”?

Before attempting to answer this question, we must first dwell upon the essence of truth. In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger writes:

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know.¹⁴

This clearing, this lighting nothing in the midst of all that is, is what enables beings to stand out, to appear as themselves, to unconceal themselves as what they are. Hence, truth as unconcealment presupposes the openness of the clearing wherein beings may free themselves from their immediate belonging to beings as a whole. This, Heidegger, in “The Essence of Truth”, terms *freedom* – but not in a metaphysical, moral or idealist sense; it is not the freedom of the subject. Rather, “freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are. Freedom now reveals itself as letting beings be”.¹⁵ Thus, “freedom is the *essence* of truth itself”.¹⁶ However, in this freeing-itself of the standing-out in the lighting, beings as a whole recedes into the surrounding darkness. Hence, truth as unconcealing is simultaneously, and more originary, untruth, concealing, for the unconcealment of beings in the lighting reveals itself to originate in the originary self-concealing

withdrawal of beings as a whole which lets the illuminating openness of the clearing stand out and come to be in the first place. Of this, Heidegger writes:

What conserves letting-be in this relatedness to concealing? Nothing less than the concealing of what is concealed as a whole, of beings as such, i.e., the mystery; not a particular mystery regarding this or that, but rather the one mystery – that, in general, mystery (the concealing of what is concealed) as such holds sway.¹⁷

The mystery, “the proper non-essence of truth”,¹⁸ is the concealing of the self-concealment of the realm of beings in which the lighting appears. The mystery is the concealed closedness of that which, by encompassing itself, encompasses the open. Insofar as it lies at its origin, this non-essence of truth, this clearing through self-concealment, is more essential to truth than the essence of truth itself. It goes beyond that which it lets come to be, the truth of beings as unconcealment in the clearing, for “the ‘non-’ of the originary non-essence of truth, as un-truth, points to the still unexperienced domain of the truth of Being (not merely of beings)”,¹⁹ that is, it points to the affinity between the “non” of the mystery and the “nothing” of the abandonment by being, thereby situating self-concealing that clears at the very heart of being itself. Accordingly, we may ascribe to being a fundamental *refusal* to unconceal itself, present even in the occurrence of unconcealing, given that being is granted the freedom to unconceal itself *as concealed* in the very opening which it gives rise to through self-concealing – that is, if the clearing is conceived of not solely as the open “amidst” of beings, as the clearing for unconcealment of beings, but also, and more originary, as the *clearing for self-concealment* of being itself. In other words, it is nothing but being that, through self-concealing, gives rise to, and gives, that through which it gives itself, by refusing to give itself, namely, the nothing, the real void, the opening of truth.

Returning to the psychoanalytic field, we may use this general structure to differentiate between two forms of essential untruth, each corresponding to two forms of occurrences of truth, wherein that which belongs to untruth unconceals itself as concealed (clearing for self-concealment) and unconcealed (clearing for unconcealment), respectively. First, insofar as the hole in the real belongs to the symbolic, the realization of the being of the subject in language through the irruption of the error, which reveals the truth of desire out in the open, presupposes a more originary concealment in the realm where it emerges, in the symbolic. That which is concealed therein as a whole, and to which the being of the subject belongs, we could call *the unconscious*; but the unconscious is *not* the order to which the mystery belongs – there is nothing mysterious about the unconscious – rather, we could speak of the concealing of what is concealed as a whole in language as *the enigma*, which unconceals itself as concealed in the form of what Freud referred to as *the rebus*, and as unconcealed in the open in *the error*. Second, insofar as the hole in the real belongs to the real, we leap to the subject of being, which essentially belongs to the mystery, to the self-concealment of being in the concealing of what is concealed as a whole in the real, which unconceals itself as concealed in the form of *the mysterious*, and as unconcealed in the open in *the revelation*.

This enables us to properly situate the problematics of faith, given that we understand it as indissoluble from the problematics of concealment-incompleteness. The affirmation of the error, which presents itself as the answer to the enigma, risks

leading to the forgetting of the sovereignty of the “big secret”. That there is no Other of the Other means that the enigma is irreducible. The symbolic is intrinsically incomplete. The unconscious is uninterpretable. Silence is the ground of language. Belonging to the enigma, speech presupposes faith to the degree that it is essentially spoken in silence. But this is also applicable to the real. The affirmation of the revelation, which presents itself as providing the answer to the mystery, risks leading to the forgetting of the sovereignty of the corresponding “secret”, as it were, of the real – that the mystery is irreducible. The real is intrinsically incomplete. Emptiness is the ground of the real. Belonging to the mystery, being presupposes faith to the degree that the real essentially occurs in emptiness.

This silence and this emptiness may be further articulated in theological terms. In the “Book of Isaiah” (45:15), we read “*Vere tu es Deus absconditus*”, “Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself”. Silence and emptiness are the two faces of the hidden God. Insofar as God is understood as the Word, he belongs to the enigma. He is nowhere to be found in language. He has withdrawn, concealed himself therein, leaving a fundamental hole behind. This is the silence of God. This is the grounding non-ground of language which The-Name-of-the-Father comes to occupy – “silence reign[s] where the Father speaks the Word ‘soundlessly’”.²⁰

But insofar as God, in accordance with the great mystical traditions, is understood as Being, as the One, he belongs to the mystery. He is nowhere to be found in the real, in creation. He has withdrawn, concealed himself therein, leaving a fundamental hole behind. This emptiness is *not* the silence of God, the non-existence of the Other of the Other, but the non-existence of the One, the abandonment by Being, the primordial abyss of the world within; it is not the death of God, understood in terms of symbolic murder, but the death of Great Pan, a void beyond silence in the plenitude of the “Everything” – “nature is corrupt”,²¹ that is, the nature of the unconscious. This emptiness has nothing to do with language, or with The-Name-of-the-Father; it does not concern the God “of the philosophers and the scholars”, as Blaise Pascal emphatically puts it, but the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob” – that is, the *real* God of the theophanies and the mysteries: *Deus revelatus*. In other words, this emptiness, this originary *absconditio* of the One, is the proper locus of the *revelatio* of the divine in the real in the essential occurrence of the mysterious, as concealed, and in the revelation, as unconcealed. Otherwise stated: in the emptiness of the non-existence of the One, beyond the silence of God in the midst of the many, *a* one essentially occurs – an encounter neither with God-the-Word nor God-the-One, but with what we could speak of as a god.

1 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VI*, trans. B. Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), p. 298.

2 Lacan, *Seminar VI*, p. 395.

3 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XX*, trans. B. Fink (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 45.

4 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book*, trans. J. Forrester (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 263.

5 Lacan, *Seminar I*, p. 263.

6 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI*, trans. A. Sheridan (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 49.

7 Lacan, *Seminar I*, p. 271.

8 Lacan, *Seminar I*, p. 271.

9 Lacan, *Seminar I*, p. 228f.

10 I am here using “the nothing” in a Heideggerian sense, and not in the sense of a form of *objet petit a*.

11 Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”, trans. David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 85f.

12 Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”, p. 92.

13 Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground”, trans. William McNeill, in *Pathmarks*, p. 97.

14 Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Works of Art”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 2001), p. 51.

15 Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth”, p. 144.

Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth”, p. 143.

16 Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth”, p. 148.

17 Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth”, p. 148.

18 Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth”, p. 149.

19 Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies

(London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 257. It should be quite obvious to the reader that the signification which I am lending these words runs counter to Meister Eckhart’s intention.

20 Blaise Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 155.