

## Questioning Ex-sistence: On the Void in the Real and the Unimaginable

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This article revolves around the question of the determinants of the conception of the real. More specifically, it argues that real should be defined not solely vis-à-vis the symbolic, as that which resists symbolization, but equally well vis-à-vis the imaginary, as that which resists imagination, enabling the author to distinguish between two forms in which the real may appear: as the unnameable, which emerges correlative to the symbolic, and the unimaginable, which emerges correlative to the imaginary. Further, the author introduces a conceptual triad corresponding to internal voids inscribed within the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, naming them silence, darkness, and emptiness. Using this triad, the author introduces a new way of conceptualizing the interrelations of the three orders, viewing them as relating to each other through their separations, to the extent that their internalized voids converge in the disjunction in-between them; for example, in the disjunction of the symbolic and the real, silence and emptiness converge. Lastly, it is postulated that there is a primordial void in the real which subsists outside and independent of the symbolic.

What is ex-sistence?<sup>1</sup> It is what is not, to the extent that that which exists is “something”. In this sense, it does not exist, but stands out from the realm of existence. Better stated, it is what *cannot* exist: impossible existence without existence. It is the impossible without the *the*, it is that which irrupts and repeats in the realm of existence as the *non-the*. It is ~~the~~ impossible.

Is the ex-sistent *in itself*? In a certain sense, it is only in the domain of ex-sistence where anything at all could be in itself, owing to the fact that the ex-sistent – unlike the image and the signifier – does not relate. Nevertheless, “itself” implies self-identity (or, stated in a weak manner, mediated by mediation, idempotence) between the “it” and the “self”. Being the unitary non-the, it does not even relate to itself as being equal to itself when repeating: it stands out without the “it” and repeats without “itself”. It is ~~that~~ which stands out without the “it” and the “itself”.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will present some fundamental ideas concerning the status of the void and ex-sistence which I first developed in my book *Speculating on the Edge of Psychoanalysis: Rings and Voids* (Lerner, 2023), primarily in the chapter “On God and Gods I: Truth and Being”.

Hence, there is a void in the place of the itself. Not being in itself, could we thus say that it repeats in the space of non-itself, that it is *in* non-itself? Were we to answer this in the affirmative, we are inevitably lead to the question of the status of the void vis-à-vis ex-sistence, of the conditions of the repetition of the non-the in the empty space indicated by the “non” of the non-itself.

The “non” of non-itself implies lack of relation, of a “self” relating to its “it” which would make “it” not only equal to itself, but, even more fundamentally, simply *equatable*, thereby making a “the” out of the non-the which may or may not be equated with anything whatsoever. From the perspective of the “non”, insofar as it designates non-relation, this lack *of* relation would appear as a void within its proper realm, that is to say, as a “non” conditioned *precisely* by the fact that is inscribed within the field of relations. Hence, it would appear as *relative* non-relation: a non-relation relative to relating *insofar* as it is excluded *within* its realm. It is the non-relation *of* relation, and not *as such*. Hence, the non-the would repeat “all-alone right where relation would be said” (Lacan, 2018, 218).

Could we even conceive of an empty space indicated by the “non” where the non-the repeats other than from the perspective of the order of the “non”, of the relative? Could we even speak of a void, of a non-relation that does not relate to relation, that is, that is *absolute* insofar as it, remaining unrelated to relation, is not even excluded within relativity, but is *outside* of it, implying that it essentially is to be understood as a pure *non-ex-sistence* excluded *only* within the domain of ex-sistence? Otherwise stated, could we speak of a hole in the real *without* ever relating it to the signifier, to the relative, to the negative?

Lacan’s answer to the question of the absolute non-ex-sistence of that which the “non” would indicate outside of the proper realm of the “non” would be – *non, ce n’est pas possible*. The void in the real, the hole in the order of the impossible, as such and in itself, is *too* impossible even for the impossible: it is *so* impossible that it is *a priori* excluded, *even as excluded*, from

the realm of the impossible.<sup>2</sup> “By definition, the real is full” (Lacan, 2019, 348) – yet the functioning of language is absolutely dependent on the hole in the real: “language only emerges in making a hole ... is only sustained by the function of what I’ve called the hole in the real” (Lacan, 2016, 21). How can this be? The word is the murder of the thing. The articulation of the signifier drills a hole in the real which enable “that” which is signified to be different from itself – for in the real, “all the seats are taken”, yet “words, symbols, introduce a hollow, a hole thanks to which all manner of crossings are possible. Things become interchangeable” (Lacan, 1991, 271). Like a sliding puzzle, with an internal circulating hole which enables circulation in the first place. To the point: “the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real [are] identical” (Lacan, 1997, 121).

The hole in the real is by definition inside-outside the real: it is outside *inside*, that is to say, it is internally excluded, a void within its proper order. Non-relation is by definition inside-outside the symbolic. The real emerges by definition in non-relation. But what of the hole in the real, of the “fundamental hole that emerges from the symbolic” (Lacan, 2016, 25)? By definition, nothing can give rise to a hole in the real except the symbolic – but how does this hole relate or “non”-relate to non-relation? Lacan presents a myth that may provide us with an answer. The vase: “the potter ... creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, *ex nihilo*, starting with a hole” (Lacan, 1997, 121); “[The vase] creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it. It is on the basis of this fabricated signifier, this vase, that emptiness and fullness as such enter the world” (Lacan, 1997, 120). The vase, here serving as an image of the symbolic as a whole, by taking form, carries within itself the very hole which it gives rise to in the real, an order from which it is

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<sup>2</sup> In the chapter “The End of Grief” (Lerner, 2023, 28-31), I suggest that the void in the real, being pseudo-negative but *a priori* excluded from the realm of negativity, and pseudo-impossible but *a priori* excluded from the realm of the impossible, is to be regarded as an epistemological symptom which essentially does not find its place in Lacan's theory. Concerning the concepts epistemological symptom, epistemological repression, and epistemological unconscious, see Lerner (2021a; 2021b; forthcoming).

radically separated. The symbolic im-ports the hole. Thus we are granted an image of the relation between the non-relation inside-outside the symbolic and that which the “non” could be said to indicate inside-outside the real: *both of them* are inside-outside the symbolic, and thus, within this hole, this vase, their corresponding voids could be said to *merge* – yet the void in the real cannot, as such, “be”, other than by courtesy of the signifier, and this “allowance” is granted by the symbolic only through a process which we could speak of as a sort of *convergence of voids*.

On the one hand, the real; on the other, the symbolic. In-between, in the disjunction of the real and the symbolic, the hole in the real, where nothing ex-sists, and the hole in the symbolic, where there are no signifiers, converge. But what takes place in this void? Let us designate “that” which emerges in the disjunction of the real and the symbolic as *the unnameable*.

Nothing hinders us from generalizing this conception of the separation-relation between the orders. Consequently, we could conceive of the orders as relating to each other *through* their separation *through* the voids which they interiorize within themselves. Otherwise stated, in the disjunction of the orders, the voids pertaining to each of them converge.

On the one hand, the imaginary; on the other, the symbolic. In-between, in the disjunction of the imaginary and symbolic, the hole in the imaginary, where there are no images, and the hole in the symbolic, where there are no signifiers, converge. What takes place in this void? Somewhat naively, and in accordance with Saussure’s conception of the sign as the unity of the signifier and the image which it signifies, a void in-between these orders would amount to a rupture in the field of signification. Hence, we could speak of “that” which emerges in the disjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic as *the senseless*.

One last time: on the one hand, the real, on the other, the imaginary. In-between, in the disjunction of the real and the imaginary, the hole in the real, where nothing ex-sists, and the

hole in the imaginary, where there are no images, converge. What takes place in this void? Let us designate “that” which emerges in the disjunction of the real and the imaginary as *the unimaginaire*.<sup>3</sup>

I think it would be worth the while to stop for a moment and introduce some conceptual clarifications. First, it seems we stumble upon the fact that what has hitherto been seen as but a term has been raised to the level of general category: *the void*. Second, this general category seems to have particularized itself and split into three concepts corresponding to voids inscribed within the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. Let us name these concepts: a void in the symbolic, where there are no signifiers, we will call *silence*; a void in the imaginary, where there are no images, we will call *darkness*; a void in the real, where nothing exists, we will call *emptiness*. Hence, the general category of the void corresponds to the conceptual triad of silence, darkness, and emptiness. Third, we may observe that we have found a general way of understanding the separation-relation between the orders in terms of this conceptual triad: the external orders relate to each other *through* their separation, *through* their internal voids, to the extent that the voids pertaining to each of the orders *converge* in their disjunctions, which is to say, that separation and relation are completely identical. Hence, in the disjunction of the symbolic and the real, silence and emptiness converge; in the disjunction of the symbolic and the imaginary, silence and darkness converge; in the disjunction of the imaginary and the real, darkness and emptiness converge. Fourth, to each of these three in-between spaces corresponds

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, I do not dwell upon what kind of phenomena the unimaginaire, as opposed to the unnameable, really corresponds. As to the unnameable, it is what concerns *jouissance*, what resists symbolization, what pertains to the phallic function and sexuation, and which, in theological terms, corresponds to monotheism insofar as it is dependent on the functioning of the Name-of-the-Father. When it comes to the unimaginaire, on the other hand, it concerns not what resists symbolization, but imagination. In other words, it is what does not let itself be captured in an image. It is what lies beyond the scope of the mirror, what evokes awe and horror: the mysterious, the vertiginous, the sublime. In theological terms, it corresponds to the encounter with a god in polytheism, or of that which cannot be grasped even in imaginary intuitions or revelations, such as the One of the Neoplatonists (and not the One of Lacan) or the unknowable God of the mystics. Otherwise stated, while the unnameable revolves around *jouissance* and corresponds to monotheism, the unimaginaire evokes awe and corresponds to polytheism, pantheism (or panentheism), and mysticism. See the chapters “Within Without: On Exile and Cosmogony”, “On God and Gods I: Truth and Being”, and “On God and Gods II: Spinoza, Author of the *Ethics*” (Lerner, 2023).

a term serving to characterize the phenomena which pertain to them: in the disjunction of the symbolic and the imaginary, where silence and darkness converge, the *senseless* emerges; in the disjunction of the symbolic and the real, where silence and emptiness converge, the *unnameable* emerges; in the disjunction of the imaginary and the real, where darkness and emptiness converge, the *unimaginable* emerges.

It seems we have run into trouble – serious trouble. Even if we were to assert that the conceptual triad of silence, darkness, and emptiness clears things up, and that the convergence of the voids provides us with a stringent manner of conceptualizing the separation-relation of the orders, we are still confronted by the fact that the *generalization* of this conceptualization implies its application to the disjunction of the imaginary and the real, to the void where darkness and emptiness converge – to the proper locus of the unimaginable. Wherein lies the problem? Precisely in the fact that this void lies *outside* and is thus *completely independent of not* only the symbolic, but *also* of silence – it is a void that lies outside of the vase – and thus the unimaginable, which belongs to the void where darkness and emptiness converge, is not even unnameable. Even more, if the real is essentially understood as ex-sistence, we find here a void wherein that which ex-sists does not in any way whatsoever ex-sist correlative to the symbolic, but only to the imaginary, and thus it seems that we have reached the point where we would be justified in speaking of an ex-sistence which has nothing to do with the symbolic, an ex-sistence which ex-sists only in relation to the imaginary. Consequently, in order to amplify the scope of the concept of ex-sistence, we would either be forced to split it in terms of the unnameable and the unimaginable, or to forcefully affirm the definition of the concept as given to us by Lacan: the real, in short, is nothing but that which ex-sists, independent of where it ex-sists, appearing in the form of the unnameable or the unimaginable, depending on where it ex-sists, that is, depending on if it irrupts in silence or darkness, as correlative to the symbolic or the imaginary.

Hence, it seems that the concept of ex-sistence has detached itself from its primary dependency of the symbolic: it is no longer defined solely in relation to it, as that which resists symbolization, as that which is excluded from and stands outside of the sphere of meaning; rather, that which ex-sists may very well assume its status as ex-sisting by resisting to be imagined, by being excluded from and standing outside of the sphere of images, thus rendering itself unimaginable and not unnameable.

And thus we are led to question of the status of emptiness, of non-ex-sistence. The void where darkness and emptiness converge lies radically beyond the reach of the signifier, even of silence. It is, as it were, beyond silence. But Lacan tells us that there cannot be any hole in the real without the signifier. Emptiness can only come into “being” by being created by the signifier, on the one hand, and by being interiorized within its proper domain, on the other. It is strictly speaking forbidden to conceive of this emptiness as being independent and primordial. Yet we suddenly find ourselves on the other side of the limit. Does this mean that we are to reject it *a priori*, owing to it amounting to a transgression of one of the most fundamental taboos of Lacan’s psychoanalysis? We have arrived at this point through a mere act of generalization, nothing more and nothing less. I believe this to appear as obvious to the psychoanalyst: it is only in the eyes of the law that heresy becomes transgression. Nothing hinders us from simply raising the question: why would it be so inconceivable that there could be a primordial void in the real which subsists independently of the signifier? Should we forbid the conception of even the most insignificant and miniscule independent void in the real? In the name of what – the name, obliging us to abandon the independent ex-sistence of the unimaginable in favor of the unnameable? Or of whom – Lacan, obliging us to abandon the generalized status of the void and ex-sistence owing to it not being sufficiently Lacanian, or, if it would be seen as an act of transgression, owing to it even being anti-Lacanian? Ultimately,

it is up to the reader to decide. Let me just settle with putting forward the following hypothesis:  
there is a primordial and independent void in the real.

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