A Brief Discussion of *Kenosis*

Žižek's oft-quoted distinction of "what we know we know, what we don't know we know …" attributed to the George W. Bush's Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, leads to the idea of things that we know but don't know that we know. Žižek has never named this important ancient category of knowing and, for whatever reasons, has not connected it to the Essene tradition that, transmitted from John the Baptist to Jesus during his residency at the Essene's desert monastery, became the basis for the Gospel and its many uses of allegory, rhetorical gesture, and aposiopesis. Lacanian author Dan Collins has made an important point about kenosis, *also failing to name it or link to its important history, but Collins nonetheless allows us to put* kenosis *into the middle of the psychoanalytical project.*

Edmund Gettier (1927–2022)

Figure 2. The Gettier Table, put in the form of binary numbers counting down from 8 (111) to zero (000). Each category "declining" knowledge as justified true belief (the left-to-right order of the columns is Truth, Belief, and Justification) is explained by Dan Collins in his essay, where both context and relations of the parts changes at each level.

	TRUTH	BELIEF	JUSTIFICATION
knowledge	1	1	1
faith	1	1	0
resistance	1	0	1
ignorance	1	0	0
error	0	1	1
rumor	0	1	0
rationalization	0	0	1
science	0	0	0

In his masterful essay, "A Short Digression on the Meaning of Knowledge," Dan Collins, following Edmund Gettier, converts the shortcomings of defining knowledge as Justified True Belief by showing how, in all of the derivative conditions where one, two, or all three of the elements are neutralized or unmet lead us to consider a matrix of errors akin to Dante's *Purgatorio*.[1] In my conversion of the table to 1's and 0's, it is evident that all of the possible conditions amount to a binary number count equivalent to decimal numbers eight to zero. The binary count has the advantage of allowing us to alter the order by which Truth (first column), Belief (second) and Justification (third) can be examined in the true or false positions, with other conditions subordinated. In the original order, Truth's four "positive" positions (knowledge, faith, resistance, and ignorance) show how it is the context by which something true can be believed or disbelieved, justified or not justified. We can just as easily begin with Justification to consider its positive cases (knowledge, resistance, error, and rationalization) to understand that all of the "states" of the JTB table vary according to context and relationships. For example, in the case of Resistance, something true is justifiable but not believed. In the case of Rumor, something untrue is believed and is not justifiable. We can insert "therefore's" and "even though's" to adjust each formal case to what we know of the cases.

For example, the case of Science is not that it is untrue, but rather it *suspends* (necessarily) the question of whether something is True. If it did not do this, it would be simple justificationalism, experiments set up to demonstrate what is already known and not really science. Faith's truth is not about the truth or falsity of what is believed but the *fact* that what is believed is believed to be *true*, and that it requires no justification. Knowledge, 111, is the co-presence of all elements. If we could justify what we believe, that would not necessarily make it true, to constitute Knowledge. It could possibly be error, 011.

Collins concludes his essay by showing how thinkers, from Plato on but especially with Freud, have concluded that the JTB's failure requires a fourth term, and that term is *jouissance*. This is the *objet petit a* form of *jouissance*, not so much the experience or feeling of *jouissance* but the condition of lack that introduces a certain circularity

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[1] Dan Collins, "A Short Digression on the Meaning of Knowledge," *Lacunæ* 18 (June 2019): 79–93.

that, as it aims for completion, involves a "topological" complexity such as that found in the torus, the cross-cap, the Möbius band, and other projective geometry forms. When we see these forms materially and sensually, we note a twist that is not present in the topological space that holds them together, as non-oriented but self-intersecting. Their "circularity" is complicated by non-orientation, which typically is a cut or margin where something flows from an inside to an outside and *vice versa*.

Collins does not mention the topology of the Gettier field, but he does represent it in the way the 000 relates to 111, science to knowledge, the point where skepticism and experiment of science suspends all judgment and presumed relation to the truth in order to qualify as inquiry. We can easily imagine the Gettier table as a Möbius band, with a twist that seems evident in each of the categories but never localized at any one position. The *jouissance* is in the way the field, in failing to relate the two extremes smoothly, relates them in a more comprehensive and complex matter.

Dan Collins, Psychoanalyst and teacher

Collins makes the point that is evident in justificationalism, namely that we do not learn anything that we do not already know. This seems to describe the close-minded bigot who, listening to anything new, rejects it unless it conforms with what he already *believes*, but the Gettier formula requires us to add the element of Truth, and psychoanalysis requires us to add the category of the Unconscious — "things that we know but don't know we know" (*kenosis*) — to conscious knowledge. *Jouissance* is not confined to this additional content; rather, it is the entire fact of conscious and unconscious knowledge being connected, and possibly connected in a *causal* way, that directs our attention to the question of desire.

Kenosis involves the larger question of how our conscious experiences and knowledge are related to the function of the Unconscious, which at some points seems to be a kind of content and at other times a pure functionality without any real content whatsoever. *Kenosis* can thus not be any kind of "stuff." It is the condition of not knowing something that comes in an alien format, and I would contend that this is none other than the $S(\cancel{A})$ of Lacan's Graph of Desire, the "signifier of the lack in the Other." We not only construct the Other as what any utterance needs in the basic requirement that it be *recognized*, but the Other as this supplier of recognition always falls short, conceals something, "knows more than it is telling us," and the signifiers it gives us are not simply less than what we need to be recognized, their very *structure* speaks to this lack.
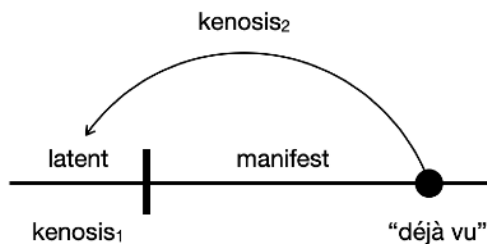
Figure 2. Kenosis may be seen in three versions, as (1) kenosis$_1$, the suppressed or lost content that initiated the metonymic, causal, signifying chain, the "blahblahblah" of everyday experience, (2) kenosis$_2$, the moment at which this chain gives way to something inexplicable, an "epiphany," or (3) the retroactive recovery, or rather realization of the *impossibility of recovery* of the lost content. Possibly, any part of the kenotic process is equivalent to the whole. Also, the manifest content, with its gaps and inconsistencies, could be considered as already charged with latent kenotic content, as in Georges Perec's *A Void*, the novel without the letter 'e'.

One form of misrecognition is well known: the Other doesn't recognize us. The Other is thinking we are someone else, or seems to prefer someone else. Parents names us after a beloved relative who has died, plans early to send them us a college so that we will closely resemble someone they admire, or dresses us to look like someone more desirable. The $S(\cancel{A})$ is a commonplace of the family and social structures that define us within culture and society.

The issue here is simple. It is true that the JTB system falls short of defining knowledge without the addition of *jouissance*, and this means that when what is missing (*kenosis*, the Unconscious) is "added back," we fulfill Collins' prediction that we learn "only what we already know," with the proviso that what we already know includes the *kenotic* missing piece of the puzzle, the S(Ⱥ). I propose that the relation to *kenosis* is not as problematic as the full project of psychoanalysis. Rather, I suggest that a relationship, or rather "non-relationship" is formed in the process of retroaction, where the S(Ⱥ) is realized (Real-ized) through the temporal logic by which what was conceived to be the first moment is realized as a subordinate product of a latent content that has come before. This is not simply a matter of recalling latent content but, rather, the realization of the full process of (1) suppression — of which

Figure 3. Tom Gauld, "The Giant Eye." Lacan's phenomenon of extimacy (the intimate externality) comes in two forms, making it impossible to say which is more basic, the external object displaying intimate qualities, or the internal element that is radically Other, as in the case of interpellation of authority at the central kernel of subjectivity.

awareness at the time is not possible; (2) manifest content, the "blahblahblah" of everyday experience; (3) a discordance or inexplicable intrusion, on the order of what is called *déjà vu*, the uncanny anomaly; then (4) a retroactive realization *that* latent content has preceded the manifest, a realization that fails to fully recover content as such, but instead gains a more comprehensive appreciation of the process as a whole.

Dan Collins explains (88–89):

> Lacan's account of the link between knowledge and enjoyment is less personal and more structural [than Freud's descriptive account of how we only come to know what fits in with the knowledge that we are already libidinally invested in]. Lacan talks about knowledge as a means of *jouissance* in the third chapter of Seminar 17. It's a commentary on the master discourse. In the passage, Lacan describes the human being as a homeostatic mechanism that relies on the pleasure principle to reduce tension to a minimum. If this were simply the case, every pleasure would be a new pleasure, separated from others in time, or it would be essentially the same pleasure, since every pleasure would be a reduction of tension. there would be no lacks or gaps in this sequence of pleasures. But because we are beings of language, trapped in discourse — the master discourse first of all — because we are mastered by language, our supposed pleasures are marked by the signifier. *Our entry into the signifying system means that we can return to the same pleasures, by means of a repetition of the signifier, but we can never attain them*: as signified, they are no longer the homeostatic pleasures they once were. And so we go beyond homeostasis to seek enjoyment beyond mere pleasure. [emphasis mine]

While language provides a kind of geographical marker allowing the subject to return to a site of past enjoyment, it simultaneously deprives the subject of enjoyment by exchanging a signifier for what was first an immediate experience. Like the letter on the refrigerator door, the subject finds that he/she is too late to achieve a balanced resolution. The signifier directs the subject to a prior but now-lost moment (Fig. 2).

It should be pointed out, to Lacanians especially, that this structure of retroactive realization is the essence of language's logical temporality, where the beginning of the sentence begins without its meaning being fully realized until the end, where a retroactive restoration takes place. Lacan relates this to a process whereby metaphor (the
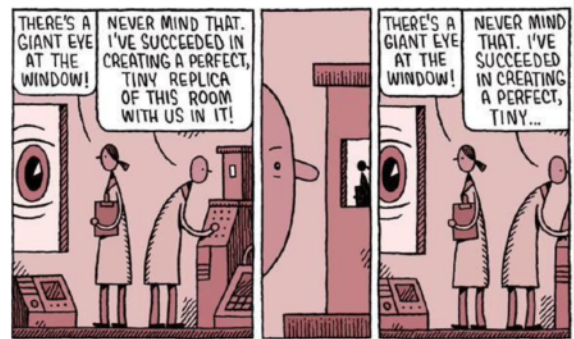
replacement of one signifier by another) is followed by a signifying chain constructed by metonymies, which have the virtue of being able to change context at the same time they link content, creating a "staircase effect" of redirecting the meaning of the sentence so that multiple registers are adjusted in the process of making what seem to be causal links.

The proof of this lies in the fact that it can be "undone" by humor, as in the Marx Brothers' joke about the viaduct. Chico, the Italian immigrant, does not understand the word "viaduct," meaning a bridge across a void. Just as Freud, unlike the native Italian speaker, sees "signor" in the proper name Signorelli, invisible to everyday Italian speakers, Chico seizes on the idea of "duck."[2] *Vy a duck?* he asks. Groucho tries to explain that is no duck in viaduct but loses the match when, in the process of describing the void he notes that, at the bottom there is likely a pond and in the pond there are likely some ducks. "So *that*'s vy a duck!" Chico proclaims, triumphant. The ducks were *ungrammatical* but *latent* within the signifier "viaduct." The metonymic links from the bridge above to the pond below are in many ways similar to the 111 of Knowledge at the top of the Gettier Table to the 000 of Science below. What was latent in the 111 that led knowledge to be confirmed by its very opposite condition, the skepticism of Science's *not knowing* becomes the *jouissance* that retroactively charges the Gettier field as a "field of play" is charged when the stadium lights are turned on and the crowd applauds the tossing of the coin to begin the game. Metonymically, the table is a staircase of conditions where Truth, Belief, and Justification turn on and off, "declining the verb 'to know'" as a series of losses. *Jouissance* comes when, at the bottom of the stair, a moment of scientific discovery occurs where the scientist attending an experiment that has gone wrong, realizes that it has failed because his/her *assumptions were wrong*.

This is the moment Bachelard addresses in his scientific essay, "La surveillance intellectuelle de soi," Chapter 4 of *Le rationalisme appliqué*.[3] This essay has been reviewed by Joan Copjec in her book, *Read My Desire*.[4] In this critique of positivism, Bachelard makes clear that "the hidden" is not simply a region of the knowable world to be cleared away by discovery and close examination but is the very category by which what is uncovered is necessarily incomplete, a true case of S(Ⱥ). The signifier of the lack in the Other is to be read literally, as a signifier located in the Other itself, hidden but simultaneously *outside* of the field of examination (Fig. 3).

Lacan refers the process of retroaction to counting, asserting that we do not know we are counting until we reach the "real number 2," which appears to us to be the number 1. That the count is a count requires a number before our point of realization, which we must re-assign as "the real number 1." The is the ordinary experience of anything new, what is called the "hapax formation." The question is: what must this have been before it was the *x* that has so suddenly appeared? Lacan asks this of anamorphosis in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. In

this case, we must reconstruct the conditions that led to the point where it was possible for Holbein to paint the anamorphic skull at the feet of the subjects of his painting, *The Ambassadors* or for the murals at the Minims Convent in Paris to geometrically distort images so that they could be seen correctly from only one point.

The answer involves admitting that there are many causes for this single effect. While generally admitting that a single cause typically results in many effects, just as a rock thrown into a pond creates a concentric outward rush of ripples, in the case of the *hapax* the geometry reverses. Retroaction requires us to find "as many causes as possible for any one effect" — something that Giambattista Vico advised in his *New Science*, in order to see how the "chance" of free choice allowed to the cultural subject was at the same time the mechanism by which "necessity" would establish itself incontestably. Chance and necessity themselves seem to be irreconcilably opposite until the *latent logic of their formation* is realized.[5] This realization led Vico to write *The New Science* and Lacan to write about anamorphosis and the Baroque. Without latency and retroaction, the binary opposition of terms is irreducible. With it, and we see how the serial order of latent and manifest, metaphor and metonymy, create the "necessary" component key to *kenosis*.
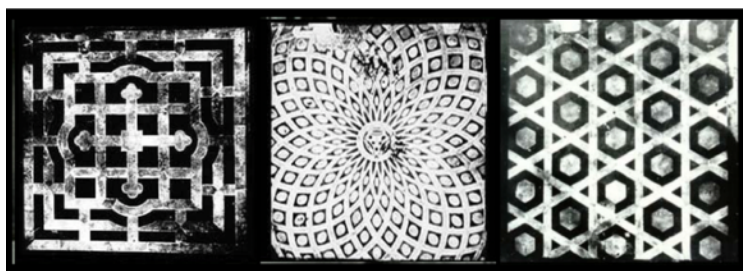

Figure 4. Ben Nicholson, "Under Foot and between the Boards in the Laurentian Library," a study of Michaelangelo's tile designs to energize the imagination and memory of scholars who, taking a break from their study of texts, would perambulate the space between the carrels to "gather their thoughts" according to the rules of emergent symmetry, the sorites.

The fact that latency emerges through imperfect symmetry has been a long-recognized principle in theology and the arts, as was revealed by Ben Nicholson's discovery of Michaelangelo's pavement designs for the Laurentian Library in Venice (Fig. 4).[6] The carrells where scholars examined texts chained to desks were linked with a perimeter of framed designs, each of which presented an original symmetrical design, but each contained a flaw that would prevent the perfect merger of parts. The circuit of frames was actually a model of the interval between the two deaths, in that its self-intersection (aspect as a circuit) involved a twist, the presence of imperfections that formed an independent latent design.

D. Kunze, Boalsburg, 23 July, 2022

[5] My contention is that Vico developed the idea of *conatus*, originally a concept of physical–natural homeostasis, into one of subjective homeostasis through a process of allowing "law" to develop through a process of free and indeterminate — metonymic — linkages. This is formalized in the paradox of sorites, where metonymic chains become the ideal basis for the seclusion of a latent signifier that will be retroactively recovered through a process of tiered symmetries ("cancellations" or "matches"). Lewis Carroll has defined this process as scattering of signifying fragments retaining tags (memes) to enable a re-assembly. This resembles what Plato designated as anamnesis, the restoration of an unconscious content preceding consciousness and recovered retroactively. *Symbolic Logic and The Game of Logic: Mathematical Recreations of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972). Conatus as "latent law" embodied in the very randomness of contingent constructions is Vico's original discovery, related to his fundamental theory of metaphor in mythic thought (which is nearly identical to Lacan's account of metaphor). See Stephanie Swales, "Metaphor of the Subject," in *Reading Lacan's Écrits: From 'Signification of the Phallus' to 'Metaphor of the Subject'*, Stijn Venheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill, eds. (New York and Abington, Oxon., UK: Routledge, 2019), 308–321. My project is to bring conatus in line with Freud's idea of homeostasis, in the 1895 essay "Project for a Scientific Psychology," and Lacan's re-qualification of the death drive in his various conceptualizations of the interval between the two deaths, where ethnography demonstrates that sorites is not just an incidental theme but a necessary logic.

[6] Ben Nicholson, "Under Foot and between the Boards in the Laurentian Library," *Thinking the Unthinkable House*, http://bennicholson.com/ThinkingTheUnthinkableHouse/show/ma/toessay.htm