

The *Nebenmensch* Thing

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It is not simply that when we imagine non-human nature as the bearer of purposes and intentions that we wishfully misrepresent as the real truth of the world. We only ever came to understand this world through trying to interpret the speech and actions of our first significant Others, on whom we remained wholly dependent to satisfy our *Nots der Lebens* in the decisive first years of life. This primary place of the Other in the subject's psychic life underlies Lacan's famous, gnomic formula that the unconscious is the "discourse of the Other." Its mnemonic signifiers and their connections or "facilitations" are the psychic precipitates of the subjects' experiences of pleasure and pain at the hands of the Other.¹

Freud's sole discussion of the *Nebenmensch* is to be found in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, perhaps more adequately translated as *Sketch for a Scientific Psychology* (*Entwurf einer Psychologie*). Unpublished in his lifetime, the *Entwurf* was a product of Freud's correspondence with Wilhelm Fleiss, and only received its title from its editors (Marie Bonaparte, Ana Freud, and Ernst Kris), with its posthumous publication in 1950. Freud himself referred to the text as "Psychology for Neurologists" or more simply as " $\phi \psi \omega$ " [*Phi/Psi/Omega*], the latter in honour of the taxonomy of neuronal types that the text enumerates. In a letter to Fleiss dated May 29, 1895, Freud describes the aim of this psychology as two-fold: first, to articulate an "economics of the nerve forces" and, second, "to peel off from psychopathology a gain for normal psychology." These two aims come together in his view that the hypertrophy of energetic forces in pathological states brings into instructive relief the mechanics of their normal functioning (*Standard Edition*, I, 295-96).

It is within this broad argumentative context that Freud confronts the question of how the cathexes linking perception and memory lead to acts of thought. It is in responding to this question that, having distinguished between two fundamental types of thought, cognitive and reproductive, Freud is then led to make a second allied distinction between remembering and judging. It is with reference to this second distinction that he introduces the idea that both these acts, remembering and judging, converge on the fellow human being (*Nebenmensch*) as their first object. The result is that the difference between the ego's experience of its external environment and its experience of the other ego is conceived as in the first instance null. In conformity with the distinction between remembering and judging, the ego's original object/environment will be bifurcated between its enumerable properties or predicates (vouchsafed through correlation of the subject's perception of the other fellow's features and gestures with its recollection of its own somatic experiences) and a pre-attributive nucleus (that

¹ Agatha Palintalethos, "Lacan's Antigone, Between Até and Polyneices Or an Ethics, Above or Beyond Politics," (unpublished draft), p. 12.

consists of that part of the other fellow's appearance that remains allergic to any such comparison):

Let us suppose that the object that furnishes the perception resembles the subject—a fellow human-being [*Nebenmensch*]. If so, the theoretical interest [taken in it] is also explained by the fact that such an object [*ein solches Object*] was simultaneously the [subject's] first satisfying object and further his first hostile object, as well as his sole helping power. For this reason it is in relation to a fellow human-being that a human-being learns to cognize [*Am Nebenmenschen lernt darum der Mensch erkennen*], then the perceptual complexes proceeding from this fellow human-being will in part be new and non-comparable—his features [*seine Züge*], for instance, in the visual sphere; but other visual perceptions—e.g. those of the movement of his hands—will coincide in the subject with memories of quite similar visual impressions of his own, of his own body, [memories] which are associated with movements experienced by himself. Other perceptions of the object too—if, for instance, he screams—will awaken the memory of the subject's own screaming and at the same time of his own experience of pain. Thus the complex of the fellow human-being [*Komplex des Nebenmensch*] falls apart into two components, of which one makes an impression by its constant structure and stays together as a thing [*als Ding*], while the other can be understood by the activity of memory—that is, it can be traced back to information from the subject's own body.²

The notion of *Nebenmensch* thus associates two features of the other: his or her ability to hold together as a nucleus irreducible to its attributes and his or her allergy to analogical identification on the basis of my experience of my own body. One among several noteworthy features of this discussion is the way that it flouts the familiar distinction between persons and things. Here the other person serves as the very paradigm of that Thing that persists behind or beyond the attribution of any personalizing property or predicate and in imperious indifference to my solicitations and remonstrations. What might be at play in this subversion of our customary distinction between person and thing?

In order to give that question its full range, it is important to first acknowledge that the passage under discussion represents the second of three significant treatments of the concept of the Thing in Freud's work. Before it stands the discussion of the topic in his essay "On Aphasia"; after it stands the discussion in his essay, "The Unconscious." In "On Aphasia" (1891), Freud, drawing on the linguistic philosophy of John Stuart Mill, had distinguished not, as in the *Entwurf* (1895,) between "Thing-complex" and "attribute-complex," but rather between "thing presentation" and "word presentation", with thing presentation substituting for Thing-complex and word presentation substituting for Attribute-complex. In the essay on "The Unconscious"

² Freud, Standard Edition 1:331.

(1915), the division between Thing-complex and Attribute-complex that had come to define the *Nebenmensch* in the intervening period is then put in contact with the earlier distinction between word-presentation and thing-presentation. Separating these oppositions from the neurophysiological locations to which they remained tied in the *Entwurf*, Freud now declares that his topography of the psychological apparatus (conscious/ preconscious/unconscious) has “nothing to do with anatomy” (XIX, 174), and, on the basis of this non-anatomical topography, affirms that “what we permissibly called the conscious presentation of the object can now be split into the presentation of the word and the presentation of the thing.” He then avers that “the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone,” so that the difference between unconscious and conscious presentation is squared with the distinction between thing-presentation and word-presentation. The significance of the perception of the *Nebenmensch* when viewed from the perspective of this new topography would therefore consist in the way that it links the unconscious presentation of a Thing with an object susceptible to word-presentation in the preconscious battery of signifiers, thus mediating between unconscious and preconscious registers.

With this brief reprise of the role of the *Nebenmensch* in Freud’s developing conception of the psychoanalytic Thing in place, I would like now to turn to Lacan’s discussion of *Nebenmensch* and *Ding* in his seventh seminar with a view to determining its interest for our broader discussion of the link between ethics and territory in Lacan’s thought and the implications that this link has for the theory of architecture. Before doing so, however, there is a final text of Freud’s that demands our attention, and that is the 1925 essay on “Negation,” for in that text Freud revisits his distinction between attributive and existential judgments after a fashion that will carry significant consequences for Lacan’s reading of the *Entwurf*.

In the 1925 essay, Freud affirms that “negation” involves cognizance but not acceptance of the repressed. Its general formula would be: I know, but it changes nothing, since what I know has no effect on the corresponding affect (147-148). Freud takes these insights concerning the role of negation in at once revealing and concealing repressed unconscious contents and applies them to his earlier discussion of the mechanisms of judgment in his *Entwurf*. On the basis of that application, he links the distinction between judgments of attribution and judgments of existence not to the distinction between word-presentation and Thing-presentation (as in “On Aphasia”), nor between attribute-complex and Thing complex (as in “The Unconscious”), but rather between expulsion (*Ausstoßung*) and affirmation (*Bejahung*) as these comprise the mechanisms of primary and secondary repressions respectively. As Freud explains, whereas judgments of attribution (expulsion) impose an internal division between good and bad drive stimulus, in judgments of existence this initial distinction forms the basis for the distinction between psychological experience and the external world. Hence, if judgments of attribution concern what the primary pleasure-ego wishes to introject or project, swallow or spit out, judgments of existence determine whether the object that is the source of this primary attribution is found

solely in the psyche or whether it can be re-found in the external world as well: "It is no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken in the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well." The judgment concerning which of my perceptions are entirely internal, viz., phantasmatic, and which can be re-found in the external world—the process of reality testing—is thus built upon the judgment concerning what my pleasure ego would like to absorb or reject. Hence the ontological question (what is real and what is not) is subject to a deontological question (what is good and what is bad) from the start:

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The function of judgment is confirmed in the main with two sorts of decisions. It affirms or disaffirms the possession by a thing of a particular attribute; and it asserts or disputes that a presentation has an existence in reality. The attribute to be decided may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—instinctual impulses, the judgment is: 'I should like to eat this'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to put this into me and I should like to keep that out. That is to say, 'It shall be inside of me' or 'It shall be outside of me'. As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical.

The other sort of decision made by the function of judgment—as to the real existence of something of which there is a presentation (reality-testing)—is a concern of the defensive reality ego, which develops out of the initial pleasure-ego. It is now no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something that is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in a perception (reality) as well. It is, we see, once more a question of internal and external.

To repeat, before the ego distinguishes between its existence and the existence of a world external to itself, it must first distinguish between those parts of its psychic experience that give it pleasure and those that do not, so that the first judgment (What do I wish to hold inside myself?) predates and provides the basis for the second (Can I re-find it in the external world?). This is no doubt what Lacan means when he says in his *Ethics*: "We make reality out of pleasure." But what ought to receive our special attention here is Freud's observation that the object of the second judgment can only ever be a re-found object. It is this insight from the later essay on Negation that Lacan will then insinuate into the discussion of the *Nebenmensch*-Thing in the *Entwurf*. With that in mind, I turn to Lacan.

In the third session of his seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan undertakes a rereading of the *Entwurf* based on his rather startling conviction that both the opposition between pleasure and reality principles and the opposition between primary and secondary processes concern "not so much the sphere of psychology as the sphere of ethics properly speaking." It should go without saying that a great deal turns here on what it might mean to speak "properly" of ethics. A couple of paragraphs after the one just quoted, Lacan makes it

clear that in his view a judicious construal of the term must anchor it in a question of “the relation of pleasure to the final good.” He goes on to affirm that a psychoanalytic ethics worthy of the name must be an ethics not of the ideal, but of the real. So what is this relation between pleasure and the good; why does it demand of us an ethics of the real, as against the ideal; and how is psychoanalysis implicated in both the relation and the demand that it precipitates?

Returning, on the basis of the just quoted remarks, to Freud’s characterization in the *Entwurf* of the relationship between pleasure and reality principles, Lacan argues that a paradox endemic to that relationship devolves from the fact that the former “cannot be inscribed in a biological system.” That the pleasure at stake in the “pleasure principle” is irreducible to the satisfaction of a biological need is according to Lacan a function of the fact that the human counterpart is immediately implicated in what counts as satisfaction for the human animal, an obvious nod to the fusion of environment and other in Freud’s *Nebenmensch* complex. Referring himself to this “paradox” that “the pleasure principle cannot be inscribed in a biological system,” Lacan then turns to Freud’s discussion of the *Nebenmensch*: “Yet, my goodness, the mystery isn’t so great if we see that this state of affairs is supported in the following way, namely, that the subject’s experience of satisfaction is entirely dependent on the other, on the one whom Freud designates in a beautiful expression ... the *Nebenmensch*.” He then goes on to affirm that: “it is through the intermediary of [this] *Nebenmensch* as speaking subject that everything that has to do with the thought processes is able to take shape in the subjectivity of the subject.” So we see Lacan here repeating Freud’s claim that the possibility of human thought rests on the correlation of memory and perception that is at stake in our first encounter with a human other.

On the basis of these preliminary remarks, Lacan then undertakes a detailed examination of the peculiar imbrication of pleasure and reality principles that he understands the *Entwurf* as a whole, but Freud’s discussion of the *Nebenmensch* in particular, to imply. That examination culminates in a discussion of what Freud in his *Entwurf* called “specific action” (*spezifische Aktion*), a concept about which we must therefore say a word.

We have seen that in the *Entwurf* Freud conceives the nervous system as animated by a tendency to discharge, which he calls the principle of “neuronal inertia.” Within this model, the need for “specific action” arises in response to endogamous stimuli that, in contrast to their exogamous counterparts, cannot be discharged by motor activity acting in conformity with the reflex arch. With a view to clarifying this peculiarity of the response to endogamous stimuli, Freud tenders the example of an infant who, by screaming and flailing its limbs, attempts to discharge the tension resulting from hunger. These outbursts of course fail to expunge the tension, which in fact will “only cease under particular conditions which must be realized in the external world” and by means of the efforts of some near-one, some *Nebenmensch*. However, the moment this near-one, typically the infant’s mother, arrives on the scene, the scream ceases to be the failed conduit for a release of tension, becoming instead an address to the other, and as such an attempt to exercise practical influence on the external environment. It is a sort of

proto-magic, but a magic whose efficacy is based on the fact that the environment the action would influence is indistinguishable from the first human Other, the *Nebenmensch*. "Specific action" is what happens when motor activity acquires the shape of a communicative gesture; the motoric scream becomes an appeal to the Other. So what does Lacan do with this? Well, following indications in the essay on "Negation", he connects it to the *Nebenmensch* Thing to the "re-found object," that is, to a repetition principle that guarantees that something will always go missing in this action of communicating pain and helplessness to the other:

When Freud sketches out what the normal functioning of the apparatus might represent, he speaks not of specific reaction [motor activity in conformity with the reflex arch] but rather of specific action as corresponding to satisfaction. There is a big system behind that *spezifische Aktion*, for it can only correspond in fact to the re-found object. We find here the principle of repetition in Freud, and it is something we will have to come back to. That specific action will always be missing something.

It is with respect to this "something" that "will always be missing"—and which, as missing, instigates the automatism of unconscious repetition—that Lacan feels entitled to conclude his re-reading of the *Entwurf* by suggesting that there exists not merely an analogy but indeed the most intimate affinity between the unconscious *Ding* and that Good for which all moral philosophies worthy of the name strive:

By way of concluding these thoughts today, I draw your attention to the analogy that exists between, on the one hand, that search for an archaic—one might almost say a regressive—quality of indefinable pleasure which animates unconscious instinct as a whole and, on the other, that which is realized and satisfying in the fullest of senses, in the moral sense as such. That it is far more than an analogy; it reaches a level of profundity that has perhaps never previously been articulated.

What is this analogy between unconscious satisfaction and the morally Good? The question, which is *the* question of the seventh seminar, is too wide ranging in its implications to be taken up in the present context. Permit me merely to say that an engagement with Lacan's treatment of the death drive in this seminar would be a necessary propaedeutic to taking it up. Such engagement could not fail to reveal the extent to which the "function of the good" that Lacan conceives on the basis of unconscious satisfaction implicates another function, "the function of the beautiful." The question of this second function would take us directly to the issue of artistic sublimation, whose formula Lacan states as follows: the elevation of an object to the status of the Thing. That's right, the art object is a stand-in for that Thing whose Freud-Lacanian prototype is the *Nebenmensch*. The implications of that formula then resonate in his three brief discussions of architecture, as they do in his discussions of anamorphosis and the literature and culture of courtly love. In outlining this chain of considerations arising from Lacan's treatment of the connection between unconscious satisfaction and the morally good, I have just described the

argumentative itinerary that my contribution to our book will take on the other side of its discussion of the *Nebenmensch*, With that precis of my global argument in place, permit me to turn things over to Lorens, who will speak to a topic that is closely allied in Lacan's imagination with that of *Nebenmensch*, the *Nächsten* or neighbor of whom Freud speaks in *Civilizations and its Discontents*.