

Which Method is Cartesian? Descartes, Lacan, and the “Accumulation of Knowledge”

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Abstract

Most philosophical Lacanians instinctively take Lacan’s engagement with Descartes – not to mention his explicit formulations about not only the identity of the psychoanalytic and Cartesian *methods* but also, moreover, that of the subject of psychoanalysis and the *cogito* – as comprising a crucial and unequivocal philosophical *repère*. Nonetheless, there is a line of thought in Lacan’s oeuvre that this orientation leaves completely unaccounted for: Lacan’s decisive point regarding knowledge as accumulation. In his recently published twelfth Seminar (*Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse*) from February of this year, Lacan argues that the *cogito* is a hinge between knowledge “in its pre-accumulative state,” to the extent that it is capable of being doubted, and knowledge as a “mode of production” which predates and even motivates capitalist accumulation. It is on this basis that we can comprehend Lacan’s seemingly conflictual or even contradictory claims that, on the one hand, Descartes inaugurates modern science by leaving the eternal truths to God (Seminar XI) and, on the other hand, that modern science forecloses truth (“Science and Truth”).

Keywords: psychoanalysis, modern science, Descartes, Lacan, method, technique

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To begin, I shall reconstruct Jacques Lacan’s fundamental claims concerning the *cogito*, and in particular, the disjunctive relation between the terms certainty, knowledge, and truth.¹

For Lacan, the Cartesian *cogito* registers a singular event, namely the philosophical inauguration of the subject of modern science and, consequently, that of Freudian psychoanalysis. Fundamentally, Lacan emphasises in the canonical Seminar XI on the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (*Les Quatre Concepts Fondamentaux de la Psychanalyse*, 1963–64) that this inauguration depends on a concept of certainty as disjunct from truth. Specifically, for Lacan, it is in *certainty* that Descartes anchors the I, and not in *truth*. In the Second Meditation, one should not say that it is *true* that “I am thinking” so much as that it is on the basis of *certainty* that thinking is possible. This certainty, as disjunct from truth, is the first condition of knowledge of one’s own existence as well as that of God and the world. Accordingly, Lacan’s heterodox claim about Descartes—and, implicitly, about psychoanalysis—is that he is the first to treat certainty otherwise than as certainty of truth. This distinction is essential to understanding Lacan’s equally heterodox claim that the primacy of certainty over truth is a necessary prerequisite of scientific progress from Copernicus to Einstein as well as, albeit for slightly divergent reasons to be discussed at length, a precondition of psychoanalysis.

Nonetheless, in spite of the productivity of this singular event, the question still remains of what happens, in the domain of Science with a capital S (to denominate its modern status), to truth? This question is considered most famously in the aptly titled 1966 *écrit* “Science and Truth” (*La science et la vérité*). On the one hand, Lacan claims that the subject of psychoanalysis is divided between knowledge and truth. Indeed, this division is the subject, which suggests a synchronic identification between the subject of psychoanalysis and the *cogito*. On the other hand, Lacan historicises the division of knowledge from truth as decisively and unequivocally modern: firstly, by way of the inaugural epistemological rupture registered by the *cogito* and the constitution of modern scientific knowledge; secondly, by way of psychoanalysis as a symptom of Science’s foreclosure of truth. To these ends, it is unclear whether one can maintain, in the final analysis, that the *cogito* and *a fortiori* the progress of science thereafter is that *with* or *against* which Lacan poses the subject of psychoanalysis.

Conceptually and chronologically it is between these two interpretations of the Cartesian

1 Limited to Seminars XI, and XII and “la Science et la vérité” (“Science and Truth”). A systematic overview would be deserving of a book-length project, notably on material from Seminars IX through XVII at least. N.B.: all citations indicate, when available, first the established French edition, then the English translation.

cogito that Lacan formulates a crucial and until now underestimated argument in his recently published Seminar XII, *Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse* (1964–65). Here, Lacan proffers the novel conjecture that Cartesian philosophy on the whole not only marks the inauguration of Science but also the beginning of *knowledge as accumulation*.² Indeed, Lacan’s argument is not concerned in the first instance with the identification or differentiation between the subject of psychoanalysis and the *cogito*. Rather, it is posed as a critique—and indeed, potentially in Kant’s or even Marx’s sense—of the *cogito* as a path between two kinds of knowledge: firstly, knowledge “in its pre-accumulative state,” i.e., *capable* of being doubted, that is, ancient *epistēmē* or pre-modern *connaissance*; secondly, knowledge “as a “mode of production”, i.e., *founded* on the primacy of certainty over truth, that is, the domain of modern scientific *savoir* (SXII: 312;300). Moreover, Lacan insinuates, if the division between knowledge and truth renders possible the accumulation of knowledge, then Descartes, even more than Pascal, would be a philosophical proto-capitalist and, what is more, *contra* what Lacan calls “naïve materialism,” it would be *Science that exploits capital* and not the other way around.³ The accumulation of knowledge, as Lacan describes it, thereby not only functions as a theoretical analogue to the accumulation of capital, but also historically conditions it.

Building upon these remarks, the aim of this essay is to demonstrate that it is in increasing order that the above arguments complicate and ultimately oppose any reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis as identified with Cartesian philosophy or, what is the same, as pre-critically rationalist.⁴ The consensus holds that Lacan’s apparently consistent approval of Descartes and avowal of the *cogito* can be taken as a kind of unequivocal philosophical *repère* with which to interpret his work philosophically and thus as the

2 Accumulation is not limited to Science alone, as Lacan has it: “The foundation, the end, the mark, and the style of the knowledge of science is, above all, that it is a knowledge that can be accumulated. Philosophy has done nothing else since then – I am speaking of the one that we can maintain as the best,” Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XII: Problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 2025), 321.

3 Lacan juxtaposes naïve realism and materialism in the earlier lessons, especially in the third December 16th, 1964). See Lacan’s discussion of Pascal and the God of Philosophers in Seminar XVI, *D’un Autre à l’autre* (Seuil: Paris, 2024).

Lacan’s reading of Pascal has been explored by Lacanian philosophers, see, for instance, Samo Tomšič “Jansenist Morality and the Compulsion of Capitalism” in *Capitalism and the New Political Unconscious* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), and Dominiek Hoens, “Capital Owes You Nothing” in *From an Other of Structure to the other of Sex: Reading Seminar XVI*, ed. Emily-Laurent Monaghan, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2026).

4 Unfortunately, given that this proposition leads to all sorts of confusion, Lacan goes as far as to state that “nous sommes ce que nous sommes, c’est-à-dire: rationalistes, Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XIV: La logique du fantasme* (Paris: Seuil, 2023), 56.

ground of the majority of philosophical approaches to his work.⁵ Nonetheless, I argue, though Descartes' "brand" of knowledge and his celebrated break from the preceding Aristotelian and scholastic philosophy is the precondition of psychoanalysis as well as that of formulating and formalising it, it is nonetheless against the Cartesian primacy of affording certainty over truth and likewise against the division between knowledge and truth that Lacan poises psychoanalysis.

Though Lacan's reconstruction of Descartes is, as already indicated, heterodox and sometimes at distance from the letter of the text, it nonetheless transpires from an issue familiar in Descartes scholarship, namely the distinction between *cogito* and *res cogitans*.⁶ In Part Four of the *Discourse on the Method* (1637), which was written in the vulgate and thus contains no express reference to *res cogitans*, yet, as the title itself suggests, this text serves as the main explanation of Descartes' (scientific) method. Therein, he writes what is most frequently cited as the *cogito*, by Lacan and others, namely "I think, therefore I am" [*je pense, donc je suis*]. The *cogito* is thus established prior to Descartes' questioning of *what* he is and thus functions in and of itself independently from any predicate of substance. Accordingly, Descartes' *method* is not as such dependent on a predication of himself *as subject*. The best one could say, then, of the *Scientific* method—I continually reemphasise—is that the *cogito* is privileged in the order of reasons in the *Discourse* on that method, to the extent—and only to the extent—that it is a first principle of *thought*. The *cogito* as a first principle of thought rather than as a substance is merely a statement, namely one of which Descartes is certain. That this statement would be sutured by Descartes to "seeking truth in the sciences" is in effect secondary to its status as simply *certain*.⁷

Indeed, the certainty of this statement is itself disjunct not only from that of further knowledge founded on it, but also from the "truth" that science supposedly "seeks." All in all, this reconstruction of the *cogito* as a statement, as opposed to *res cogitans*, permits Lacan to make the tripartite distinction among "certainty" (as pertaining to the statement itself), "knowledge" (as what is founded on the statement), and "truth" (the search for which is sutured to the statement by Science).

5 Jean-Claude Milner's *L'Œuvre claire* is the most elegant example of this problem, other philosophers, who have no doubt inspired a re-thinking of the *cogito* have the tendency to reduce Descartes' entire philosophical advance to the 'cogito', as the moment of qualitative evacuation. For instance, for all its ravishing ingenuity, Žižek jumps from the subject to the *cogito* in the opening pages of *The Ticklish Subject*, "the spectre of the Cartesian subject," to the "*cogito*," without venturing to expound their relation in a precise manner, Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 1–5.

6 In his careful exegesis Jean-Luc Marion convincingly accounts for the difference between the *cogito* and the *res cogitans*. See Jean-Luc Marion's *Sur la pensée passive de Descartes* (PUF: Paris, 2013).

7 I therefore agree with Martial Gueroult, who articulates this precisely. See Martial Gueroult *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons, I Dieu et l'âme* (Paris, Aubier, 1953).

By contrast, in the Second Meditation of the eponymous *Meditations* (1641), which on the whole is far more oriented toward theoretical and philosophical questions, Descartes directs his attention towards *what he is*, under condition that the *cogito* holds. Though he repeats the process of the *Discourse* by reaching a *moment* of doubt—to the point, famously, of hypothesising a *malin génie* who would be deceiving him—and thereby inferring his *being* from the very state of doubting or, for that matter, of *being* deceived, he does not infer his existence from thought as such but from the possibility of deception. This shortcut is evidenced by the significantly abbreviated statement of certainty: that “I am, I exist” (*ego sum, ego existo*). Thus, while it could be argued that Descartes’ existence is inferred on the basis of thinking that he does not exist (“is it possible that I do not exist?”), Lacan emphasises the fact that Descartes never demonstrates that he is the one thinking by which he exists. Nonetheless, it is on this basis that Descartes subsequently arrives at defining *what he is*, namely as *res cogitans*: “But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said—a thinking thing.”⁸In spite of the fact that this definition somewhat diverges from those given in the history of philosophy (e.g., Aristotle’s “rational animal”), Lacan criticises this leap to thought as an essential or necessary attribute of the I (*ego*). In what follows, I will demonstrate how this inference, in spite of productively privileging certainty from truth, permits a more extreme foreclosure of truth.

On the Technique of the Psychoanalytic Method

Lacan’s basic coordinates in Descartes have now been established and the motivation behind the disjunction between certainty and truth and the privilege that is accorded to the former over the latter has been substantiated. Nonetheless, it remains unclear what this disjunction actually entails: how can certainty—which is often understood as certainty of truth or, more precisely, as a conviction that a statement is true—be disjoined from truth? In order to answer this question, I turn to Lacan’s heterodox epistemology as outlined in the third lesson of Seminar XI, pertinently titled “Of the Subject of Certainty.” by its editor Jacques-Alain Miller. I will unpack what is routinely taken to be a series of uncontroversial statements, chiefly among them that “Freud’s method is Cartesian.” More precisely, I will argue that though this statement is usually taken as a premise of a syllogism whose conclusion is that psychoanalysis is as such Cartesian, the matter is far from unequivocal. One can see the difficulty already in the translation of the term *démarche* as “method,” which suggests an overall correspondence between Freud and Descartes (or, moreover, his *technically* defined method.) Better would be to translate the

8 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume II, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 18. Henceforth, *CSM I* or *II*.

term as "approach" or even, bearing in mind its etymology (*dé-marche*), as "step," which suggests a more local coincidence in spite of the apparent global consequences.

This series of statements is presented textually in the following way:

1. On the one hand, for Descartes, "the major term" of Freud's method "is not truth. It is *Gewissheit*, certainty." Truth, according to Lacan, applies to the "created eternal truths," e.g., " $2 + 2 = 4$," and not of the *cogito* itself. More precisely, for both Descartes and Freud, "doubt is the support of certainty." That is, the certainty of the *cogito*, being supported by doubt, does not in and of itself restore any indubitability of truth. This "point" of doubt/certainty as disjunct from truth is "where the two approaches [*démarches*] are related, converge." Consequently, Freud's discovery of the unconscious proceeded "in an extremely analogous fashion" to Descartes' inference of the *cogito*: "where he doubts [...] it is assured that a thought is there, which is unconscious, which means that it is revealed as absent" (SXI: 36-7; 35).

2. On the other hand, it is exactly "here that the dissymmetry between Freud and Descartes is revealed." This is not immediately in the foundation of the subject of certainty on doubt rather than on truth—i.e., "it is not at all in the first approach of the certainty founded by the subject"—but instead in the distinction between whose doubt and whose certainty is in question. Freud's doubt is that from which he infers the certainty of the subject of the unconscious itself (*I think* as absent), whereas Descartes' doubt is that from which he infers his own certainty of himself as thinking thing (*I think* as present). Accordingly, for Freud, certainty no longer proceeds from the resolution of doubt whereas for Descartes — in a "restoration of truth in the hands of the Other"— it proceeds from the guarantee of truth. (SXI: 36-7; 35).

It is clear from these above passages that Lacan's statement "Freud's approach is Cartesian" is not an avowal of Descartes' method—especially as concerns the "created eternal truths"—so much as an attempt to distinguish between the *cogito*, otherwise named "the Cartesian subject," and *res cogitans*, which, for Descartes, is the subject. The former is the subject of certainty, both the *cogito* and the subject of the unconscious, whereas the latter is the supposed truth of this subject as guaranteed by God/the Other. Thus, the initial disjunction between certainty and truth is merely momentary, identifiable only in the Second Meditation, and immediately lost in the proceedings.

Having established this divergence between Descartes and Freud, let us now investigate

an at once broader and more rigorous interpretation of the statement that “Freud’s approach is Cartesian”:

a. The “doubt” and “certainty” on which Freud and Descartes converge is restricted to the First and Second Meditations. Indeed, when Lacan speaks about doubt, he is referring to the “hyperbolic doubt” of none other than the First Meditation. This doubt is not Descartes’ method—certainly *not* a permanent feature of this method, only necessary to exercise once in one’s life—but rather a strategic *procedure* for establishing the foundations of what would be the Cartesian method. Indeed, if Descartes’ *Discourse* is “on the method,” it is precisely because its entire procedure is precursory with respect to this method, which is itself exercised in the *Dioptrics*, *Geometry*, and so forth. Thus, to suggest that “Freud’s method is *the Cartesian method*” or, better, that “Descartes was *Freudian*,” even *avant la lettre*, misses Lacan’s point entirely: Freud’s method in the *Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) is Cartesian *only to the extent that* it aims “to surmount that which connotes all of the content of the unconscious [...] *I am not sure, I doubt*”; yet, by prolonging this very step, Freud precisely *makes a method* of what in Descartes is *purely a precursor* to this method, thereby performing, methodologically, a retrograde of the *Meditations* (SXI: 36;35). Thus, hyperbolic doubt is transformed from a one-off procedure into a *permanent* feature of the Freudian method of interpretation.

b. As we have already established, the point of *convergence* between Freud and Descartes is that, in both cases, “doubt is the support of certainty.” Nonetheless, this should not be confused with saying that for Freud as *much as* for Descartes, this certainty would be of God (which would be suggested by a homology between the one and the other). Hence, the Third and *a fortiori* the Fifth Meditations are nowhere to be found in the Freudian method. Indeed, Lacan’s point is that certainty impedes technique “Doubt, then, is a sign of resistance,” (SXI: 36;35). For example, in an analysis, on the one hand “something is there” and yet, on the other hand, “oh, it couldn’t possibly be *that...*,” that is, “I am *certain* that it is *not* that”—*not* my mother, and so on. Hence, in order for a psychoanalysis to *work*, the *certainty supported by doubt must itself be doubted*. In this sense, if not for the fact that in both cases doubt is the support of certainty, it could be said that psychoanalysis is, as far as the method is concerned, *anti-Cartesian*. Furthermore, doubting is not specific to analysis but is the generic functionality/operativity of the unconscious. To formulate the above in a more reduced manner: (1) Cartesian certainty is *supported*

by doubt—that is, if we take the Cartesian method to be hyperbolic doubt
(2) Freudian psychoanalysis *doubts* this certainty.

c. Freud’s method is more akin to a “retrograde” of the *Meditations*. For Descartes, in order to reach the point-zero of certainty, that is, the *cogito*, one must doubt; thus, one begins with doubt, and ends up with certainty within the bounds of this procedure about “what is [...] *incapable of being doubted*.”⁹ For Freud, on the other hand, the subject is always capable of being doubted, since “the subject is ‘at home’ in the field of the unconscious” (SXI: 36; 37). Indeed, the practice of psychoanalysis is none other than the procedure of *doubting* this certainty in the form of various resistances, proceeding from this dissymmetry: in Descartes’ case, we begin with doubt but, on the basis of the *cogito*, end up being certain of God, that is, what Lacan calls “the subject supposed to know;” by contrast, a psychoanalysis begins by developing a transference, that is, by propping the analyst up as the subject supposed to know, precisely to the extent that, by means of the aforementioned certainty, one begins to doubt it. Thus, all in all, as Lacan puts it, “Descartes did not know, except that [his philosophical method] involved the subject of a certainty and the rejection of all previous knowledge—but we know, thanks to Freud, that the subject of the unconscious manifests itself, that it thinks *before* it attains certainty” (SXI: 38; 37). Arguably, then, the subject of the unconscious is in a perpetual state of (absent) thought without *any* ultimate certainty.

All in all, if there were a homology between Freud and Descartes on the basis of method, then we would get something like the *opposite* of a psychoanalysis. Furthermore, we would miss the point that Freud systematises hyperbolic doubt as a *technique*, and thus “reverses” the constructive order of the *Meditations*. In this sense, Freudian technique *hyperbolises hyperbolic doubt* by transforming a “moment” into an enduring feature. More precisely, Freud’s technique “reverses” the Cartesian *theoretical* order of reasons—against Descartes’ “secret of [the] method”, namely that “some things can be known on the basis of others”¹⁰—in a *practical* retrograde (such that some things are precisely consciously *unknown* by the fact of unconscious knowledge). We will return to this point in due course. For now, let it suffice to say that it is on this basis that one can see how the statement “Freud’s method is Cartesian” is, when one gets down to the fact of the matter, a *critique* of Descartes, already anticipating his more or less straightforwardly anti-Cartesian train of thought in Seminar XII: Freud operates with a subject that, being unconscious and

9 Descartes, *CSM I*, 10.

10 Descartes, *CSM I*, 21.

thus to the extent that it thinks, is *not yet* certain of itself—thus *not the Cartesian subject* in the final analysis—that is, with a subject that doubts *prior* to any certainty that “I am,” or that “it is.” This suggests, *in nuce*, that Freud’s method concerns precisely *not* knowledge as accumulated by Descartes but rather in its *being doubted* prior to any certainty that would license this accumulation.

This conclusion covers Lacan’s position on the structural relationships and divergences between Descartes and Freud. Nonetheless, to begin exploring the historical ones—and specifically the stronger, perhaps overstated claim (not made *per se* by Lacan but suggested) that the subject of the unconscious is the *cogito*—let us now reappraise the “created eternal truths.” As I have already suggested, the transferral of truth to God is crucial not only to the privileging of certainty, but also to the accumulation of knowledge.

How can a truth, for Descartes, be at once eternal *and* created? Descartes introduces into philosophy a “divine arbitrariness” that is expressed in his *Replies*, but never, interestingly enough, in his published work: it is not simply that God is eternal, hence the guarantor of truth as eternal, but precisely that God himself *creates* these truths—not only the truths of metaphysics (e.g., “all bodies are extended”), but also those of logic and even mathematics (e.g., “ $a = a$ ”). Indeed, he goes as far as suggesting that God is able to change these truths if He wishes to do so.¹¹ For Lacan, the importance of this stipulation is the following: on the one hand, it is Descartes’ transferral of truth to God that makes the shift from arithmetic (as presupposing intuitive truths about integers) to algebra (as operating purely formally among letters); on the other hand, this transferral is what permits the purely self-coherent operativity of *knowledge*, which, albeit transpiring from an initial *certainty*, has nothing to do with *truth* beyond its guarantee by God (cf. SXI: 208;243). Put another way: conceiving “truth” not in terms of a pre-existent fact of the world but instead in terms of something that is strictly the result of a *decision* is a basic conceptual precondition of modern Science; yet, it is precisely by conceiving the decision from which it is a result as that of God’s that permits truth never to be in question in Science and thus, as will be seen, licenses the accumulation of knowledge. Accordingly, one already sees to what extent a theoretical shift (“created eternal truths”) not only became possible with the advent of Science but also made possible a practical shift (“accumulation of knowledge”).

Let us now expound some important points related to this double-edged corollary by way of Lacan, insofar as it concerns the *cogito* itself:

- a. Firstly, there is the issue of intuition. On the one hand, as Lacan puts it in the 1964 revision—under the title “The Position of the Unconscious”—of a 1960 remark, “the *cogito* marks [...] the break with the very assurance

11 Descartes, CSM II, 93.

conditioned by intuition."¹²

Indeed, to the extent that Descartes has doubted all previously certain knowledge, at least as far as pertains the "wavering assurance of the senses" (or the imagination), there is no pre-existing intuitive presupposition left by the Second Meditation. On the other hand, Descartes makes clear that the foundation of his Method thenceforth is the *simplex intuitus* (the "clear and simple idea" or, more literally, "intuition"): e.g., anyone can see by mental intuition alone, by the sheer cognitive clarity that the subject himself exists or that a triangle is bounded by three lines.¹³ Hence, it is not only that Descartes evacuates intuitive knowledge but also, precisely, *re-defines* intuition on the functional, ground-level certainty that results from this evacuation. Therefore, intuition remains intact, only not conceived on the basis of any kind of *naturally* assured intuition so much as on that of a *divinely* assured intuition, thereby only doubling down on the Other as guaranteeing the efficacy of this purely formal operativity.

b. Secondly—and consequently—there is the issue of deduction. On the one hand, Lacan famously "translates" *I think, therefore I am* into *I am the one who thinks: therefore I am* in order to resolve the infamous problem of the *therefore* and the deduction or, at the very least, inference that it implies: the *I* of the *I think* is divided from the *I* of the *I am*, the subjective split is the *Entzweiung* (literally, "two-ing") of the one from the other, hence the *ergo* itself. Accordingly, for Lacan, this inference is not a deduction at all (or even an inference, for that matter) but rather the mark of the psychical causality *qua* logical implication in or even as the subject of the unconscious (cf. SXII:309-313).¹³ Nonetheless, on the other hand, *if taken as a deduction*—and, specifically, if this *ergo* is taken as *true* and not merely the support of certainty—then it must be God who guarantees its truth: "In the ego that Descartes accentuates [...] one must grasp the point at which it continues to be what it presents itself as: *dependent on the god of religion*."¹⁴ Put simply, then, from the perspective of the *cogito*, the *ergo* is its disjunction from the *ego*, whereas from the perspective of the *ego*, the *ergo* is its conjunction with the *cogito*: hence the (in the new sense "intuitive") idea of a *res cogitans* who makes further deductions.

12 Jacques Lacan, "Position of the Unconscious" in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York: Norton, 2007), 832; 705.

13 For an excellent development and consolidation of these points, see 309-311.

14 Lacan, *Écrits*, 865; 735.

This insight into the two-sidedness of Descartes' "created eternal truths" and its effect on both intuition and deduction seriously complicates the most important of all features of Lacan's reading of Descartes with which I began: that the function of the *cogito* as a singular event, however punctiform, is the one by which pre-modern *connaissance*, assured by intuition yet concerned with truth, was relinquished and modern *savoir*, assured by deduction yet unconcerned with truth, had commenced.

This thesis is not unique to Lacan's oeuvre, and is articulated at length by theorists of science working in close proximity to Lacan, from Alexandre Koyré, whom Lacan invited to his seminar in 1955, to Louis Althusser who had invited Lacan to the ENS in 1964, all of whom more or less agree on the above-cited break.¹⁵ Yet more specifically, for all of the above-cited authors, pre-modern *connaissance* (or "ancient episteme") is predicated on a relationship of sensation, thereby fundamentally qualitative, between the subject and the object, whereas modern *savoir* or Science is conversely predicated on mathematical formalisation (specifically a mathematised physics) to evacuate the realm of sensible appearances and qualities.¹⁶

Specifically, Descartes' *cogito* is the first inauguration of a subject *itself* stripped of all of the qualitative markers of empirical individuality, although—to the extent that he refers to "a thinking thing" as one that "doubts, affirms, denies, wills, and refuses, *and which also* imagines and senses"—Descartes himself did not sustain this subject, instead he reinstates the subject with qualities on the basis of the certainty that he achieves through doubt.¹⁷ Properly speaking, then, it is on the basis of the *cogito* as a subject of certainty and not, supposedly, of truth that, beginning with Galileo—as epitomised by the famous aphorism by which "the great book of the universe is written in the *language* of mathematics"¹⁸—that, strictly speaking, the subject of science is sustained without reference to consciousness such that the so-called Universe becomes sufficiently knowable through or, better, as a formal "language."¹⁹

Consequently, by evaluating this division, let us now confirm that pre-modern *connaissance*

15 See Chapter Two of Jean-Claude Milner's *L'Œuvre claire* for a systematic account of the theory of modern science. Jean-Claude Milner. *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 33–69; 17–46.

16 Milner, *L'Œuvre claire*, 37–39; 21–23.

17 Descartes, *CSM* II, 18. Italics mine.

18 Galileo, quoted in Milner, *L'Œuvre claire*, cf. Galileo, 1960 [1623], 184. Italics mine.

19 As noted by Milner, Descartes' *cogito*, which is in fact the *res cogitans*, concerns the subject irrespective of empirical individuality. Moreover, this subject, which Milner describes as "a correlate without qualities assumed by a thought without qualities: we can see how this being-called the subject by Lacan, but not by Descartes—corresponds to what modern science does," Milner, *L'Œuvre claire*, 22.

is non-productive, since, by way of the subject-object relationship of sensible quality, it is supposed merely to re-articulate, by way of method or the "use of reason," what is already there in the "cosmos," or the pre-Universal world. Accordingly, for this knowledge, truth is always that of knowledge, namely the one that pre-exists it, on which it is based, and that thereby confirms it and to which it should aim: knowledge begins and ends with truth. Conversely, modern *savoir* is productive to the extent, precisely, that by re-founding knowledge on a subject of certainty and not of truth, thereby subtracting knowledge from sensation or quality, it is able, by way of "writing in the language of mathematics," to produce new knowledge, irrespective of its truth.²⁰

In this sense, Lacan's reading of the *cogito* at least *appears* to be historicist to the extent that the subject of the unconscious itself (and not merely the subject of science) would be variable or even emergent in history: as Lacan unambiguously puts it in the "Position of the Unconscious": "The unconscious, prior to Freud, is *not* purely and simply."²¹

As a clarifying counterpoint to this line of argumentation, consider Lacan's example of Newton's laws of gravitation. Clearly, on the one hand, physical objects obey the laws of gravitation before Newton discovered them or, more precisely, formulated them. Nonetheless, in Seminar XII, Lacan asks the viable question of whether these laws or their formulations would have any *truth* before the advent of Science: "where was the truth before the establishment of knowledge?" (SXII: 287;249). His answer is, paradoxically, that the truth of the laws is simultaneously "authenticated" and irrelevant after its formulation. Hence, on the other hand, Newton's discovery of these laws attests more to himself as a subject of science than to the objects that obey them.

Accordingly, we will see that the apparent historicism of Lacan's reading is merely the vehicle for discerning not only what is structural (the subject of the unconscious or the laws of gravitation) but also what has been vacillated over against the invariance of structure (the subject of science as one capable of formulating those laws): the subject of the unconscious is *not* the subject of science so much as the latter is what makes the discovery of the former possible (like the laws of gravitation) and, even more pertinently, necessitates the emergence of psychoanalysis as well as both its *subjects* and its theory of *the* subject.

Now, the paradox is that though this Science, evacuated of sensible quality, stripped the

20 As Lacan quips in "Science and Truth," "Need it be said that in science, as opposed to magic and religion, knowledge is communicated?" 877; 744. Yet at the same time, "[...] this knowledge includes a mode of communication which sutures the subject it implies," Lacan, *Écrits*, 877; 744.

21 Though it should be noted that Lacan's argument also hinges on several structural, and not historical propositions, including "the unconscious is a concept founded on the trace left by that which operates to constitute the subject," Lacan, *Écrits*, 830-31; 703-704.

subject of (any pretence to) empirical individuality, Lacan clearly identifies the change at stake in the shift from the subject of the unconscious to the subject of science as, precisely, the *empirical sensibility* of this subject: “our *experienced* division as subjects” is the “division between knowledge and truth.”²² Put another way, though the subject is not an empirical individuality to begin with—and Science makes this obvious—it is the evacuation of sensuous quality in Science—to the extent that it has an effect on the subject—that makes the subject’s not being an empirical individual to begin with *empirically sensible*.

Accordingly, the subject of science would not be that of the unconscious as such but rather the condition that it be *experienced* as such. It is by way of this paradoxical but also empirically sensible premise that one could indeed begin to unpack Lacan’s equally (if not more) famous statement in the *écrit* that “the subject upon which we *operate* in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science.”²³ Put another way, the subject of psychoanalysis is the one who, as conditioned by Science, *experiences* the subject of the unconscious, indeed symptomatically. Hence why, for Lacan, psychoanalysis, as an experience, is a *symptom* of Science while, as a discourse, it is just as much the emergent yet tentative antidote to it. Literally, one could say that psychoanalytic practice arose as a manner of attempting to “treat” Science *qua* affliction of the subject.

In this sense, psychoanalysis is *literally* a retrograde of Science to the extent that it is not only made possible by it but also operates *on* its product, is effected by it, and, arguably, attempts to halt its effects, or at least put them in doubt, hence the claim that the subject upon which we *operate* in psychoanalysis can *only be* the subject of science: in fact, if, as Lacan puts it, “we [psychoanalysts] no longer have anything with which to join knowledge and truth together but the subject of science,”²⁴ then it is precisely to the extent that psychoanalysis, by operating *on* the subject of science, her *symptoms*, re-joins knowledge and truth in the face of the foreclosure of the latter by the former; or, again in terms similar to the same *écrit*, if Science evacuates all reference to the empirically sensible object, then the object of psychoanalysis, namely the *objet a* must be *inserted* into the subject of science.

Now, we are in a position whereby we can critique the apparent equivalence between the psychoanalytic subject and the *cogito*. As one can tell from the above, the point is *not* that the most exemplary model of the subject, Freudian or Lacanian, would be the *cogito*—which would, again, implicitly entail that there be a homology between one method and the other—but rather that psychoanalysis itself must treat the “problem”

22 Lacan, *Écrits*, 856; 727.

23 Lacan, *Écrits*, 858; 729. Italics mine.

24 Lacan, *Écrits*, 869; 737.

or even “symptom” of the modern subject, the one *produced* by Science. Indeed, if truth is foreclosed by Science in the symbolic, as Lacan points out in the same *écrit*, then it must reappear in the real, in the form, precisely, of a psychoanalysis.²⁵ This historical dimension is explored at some length in Seminar XVI *From an Other to the other*, where Lacan says that psychoanalysis is a “symptom” that “emerges in relation to a turning of knowledge in history”, that of the *cogito*.²⁶ If the *cogito* is the subject of Science, then, by “operating” on this subject in psychoanalysis, the Freudian method is literally *counter-Cartesian*.

Nonetheless, psychoanalysis’ “re-joining” of knowledge and truth does not amount to a regression to a pre-modern *connaissance*—which nonetheless unfortunately pervaded among psychoanalysts from Carl Jung to Michael Balint, as made clear by Lacan—but rather articulates, and thus avows, precisely what has been foreclosed by Science. That this foreclosure is constitutive of the subject of science necessitates a specific methodological intervention on behalf of psychoanalysis. Instead of beginning with hyperbolic doubt, and thus certainty instead of truth, leaving the latter to God, which would afford an interrupted continuation of the accumulation of knowledge, psychoanalysis takes the subjects of science *qua* products of this accumulation and treats them clinically and theoretically.

Disquisition on a “Crucial Problem”: Knowledge as Accumulation

The historical import of Lacan’s thesis puts him at odds with the likes of Louis Althusser with respect to the relationship of Science and capitalism. For example, in *Pour Marx*, Althusser argues firstly that *science* is not inherently ideological, and *a fortiori* that science can be thought of as *distinct* from *ideology*. Lacan would likely reject the former (“weaker”) claim, while avowing the latter (“stronger”) claim insofar as he argues, albeit for different reasons, that Science operates autonomously owing to its division from truth. While Althusser and Lacan may agree on this thesis, they would not agree on its consequences. It is precisely the autonomy of science (as distinct from ideology), Althusser avers, which affords the possibility of its radical potential *qua* science, exemplified by the respective “new sciences” of Galileo and Marx.²⁷ By contrast, however, Lacan’s emphasis is that Science’s revolutionary force, is precisely what bolsters and even exploits capitalism for its own purposes in a “curious copulation.” While, a lengthy disquisition on their respective texts is outside the remit of this one, what shall be emphasised in what follows is the difference in their respective emphases regarding the autonomy of Science, which makes it operate more efficiently.

25 Lacan, *Écrits*, 874-5; 742-3.

26 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XVI: D’un Autre à l’autre* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 116.

27 Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1965), 187.

It is at this point that we should turn now to the arguments Lacan proposes in Seminar XII on the relation of the *cogito* not only to Science but also, consequently, to capitalism. As previously mentioned, Lacan describes this initiation of science as introducing an epistemological schism between the pre-accumulative state (knowledge as pre-modern *connaissance*) and the accumulation of knowledge (knowledge as modern scientific *savoir qua Science*), which is precisely congruent with the division between knowledge and truth. But the dimension that Lacan adds here—before his lengthy ruminations on Marx—is that what serves to grow knowledge, is what also serves to grow capital. In this sense, Descartes is a proto-capitalist. To draw our attention to another Marxian reading of Descartes, Antonio Negri makes a similar argument in *Political Descartes* when he suggests that Descartes puts forth a “reasonable ideology” that gives rise to the emergent bourgeoisie, and, more generally, liberal ideology. But what is surprising—and even ironic—for a Marxist is that he makes this argument on a purely “theoretical” or “methodological” level in reading Descartes and even goes as far as to explicitly deny any *historical* development to Descartes’ thought *as thought*, thereby ultimately reducing Descartes to a kernel of this ideology. While Negri’s book is certainly erudite, he fails to register the schism that I defend herein: namely, the one that Descartes introduces between knowledge and truth.²⁸ By contrast, Lacan’s point explicitly goes in this latter direction in which Negri does not dare to go: the Cartesian method *qua* method of modern Science is *literally* that of the accumulation of capital, not to the extent that capital “uses” the scientific method, but rather the other way around; or, as Lacan says in a striking passage from SXII:

From Descartes onwards, knowledge, that of science, is constituted on the *mode of the production of knowledge*. Just as an essential stage of our structure which is called social, but which is in reality metaphysical, and which is called capitalism, is the accumulation of capital, the relationship of the Cartesian subject to that being which is affirmed in it, is founded on the accumulation of knowledge. Knowledge from Descartes onwards, is what can serve to increase knowledge. And this is a completely different question to that of the truth (SXII: 312;300).

Indeed, if we think of the Cartesian epistemic ideal, it is nothing less than the unity of the sciences, but precisely in a *generative* sense. His metaphysical system aspires to nothing less than an explanation of “all natural phenomena, that is, all of physics,” as Descartes puts in his *Traité de l’homme*.²⁹ And thus there is no doubt that the Cartesian system aspires to the One, that is, the “de-creation” of the eternal truths and thus of God, which is indeed no way of abolishing religion, whatever Freud himself might have thought

28 Antonio Negri, *The Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project* (London: Verso, 2007), 216–17.

29 Descartes, *CSM I*, 81.

about the gradual secularisation of modern Science. One need but recall Jean Hyppolite's remark that Freudian science can be described as "a religion *against* religion" – which, incidentally, is one manner in which Freud's affinities at the very least are occasionally Cartesian, but only to the extent that they are counter-psychoanalytic.³⁰

Going further, all of the above takes on a completely different meaning when we consider what Lacan means by "pre-accumulative knowledge." While Lacan does not define it explicitly, we can infer from a number of closely related passages that the pre-accumulative state of knowledge, which we may call pre-modern *connaissance*, amounts to the scholastic cosmology against which Descartes is explicitly working or, more generally, to cosmology broadly construed. Examples of this line of reasoning abound, notably in SXI: "primitive science has taken root in a mode of thinking which, playing on a combinatory, on such oppositions as those of Yin and Yang, water and fire, hot and cold, make them lead the dance—the world is chosen for its more than metaphorical implications (SXI:152;151). Yet more specifically, these cosmologies are, as already partially suggested, *sexual* to the extent that they postulate masculine and feminine principles (e.g., form/matter or Yin/Yang) which supposedly complement one another such as to create and indeed reproduce the cosmos as well as the subject's relationship to it: hence the *presence* of an unformalized yet presumed sexual relationship. Accordingly, then, modern Science registers the moment where the "parallelism" between the subject and the cosmos no longer obtains. As Lacan has it,

Cosmological thought is essentially founded on the correspondence—*not biunivocal but structural*—between the microcosm and the macrocosm: the enveloping of the former by the latter. This microcosm, you may call it whatever you like—subject, soul, *noûs*. This cosmos, you may call it whatever you like—reality, universe. But you can suppose that the one envelops the other and contains it, and that the one contained manifests itself as the result of the cosmos, as that which corresponds member to member. It is impossible to extirpate from cosmological thought this fundamental hypothesis... (SXII: 68; 33).³¹

For this reason, we may conclude that pre-accumulative knowledge, or pre-modern *connaissance* is not "productive," in the sense of accumulative knowledge, or even *reproductive*, since it presupposes the One that it wants to prove, namely the One of the sexual relation and hence the possibility of positing such equal and opposite "ratios"

30 Lorenzo Chiesa brought this remark to my attention. It is from Lacan's exchange with J. Hyppolite in Jacques, Lacan, *Séminaire II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

31 The quote continues by stating that this hypothesis is in fact dependent on a "certain use of language," a proposition that I do not have the space to analyse here. Translation mine, italics added.

as above mentioned. From this point of view, modern Science is certainly a mode of production, and the Cartesian subject is the locus of said production, but it is also literally a “mode of reproduction,” which grounds the possibility of a new (and smoother) way of “negating” the absence of a sexual relation (not by disavowal, but by foreclosure): precisely, not by presupposing a One so much as by *aiming toward* a One, which would be the completion of knowledge and ultimately the realisation of a sexual relation. This is a further problem for psychoanalysis, if one considers Freud’s dubious presumption of a unifying principle (Eros) in spite of—or indeed because of—his scientism.³²

The consequence of interpreting “pre-accumulative” knowledge as I have is perhaps textually forced yet also profoundly explanatory. Indeed, we can see the resonance between *connaissance* as sexual cosmology and *savoir* as *both* ultimately realising (or attempting to realise) a sexual relation by way of the following surreptitious remark from SXII: “Knowledge [...] in its own growth is regulated by laws which are different to those of intuition, which are those of the symbolic operation and of a *close copulation of number with a real*, which is above all the real of a knowledge” (SXII: 300;312). What does this mean, “a close copulation of number with a real”? Numerically speaking if number could “copulate” with the real of sex this would mean that the sexual relation can be written as though it were just as writable as any other scientific formula, such as Newton’s formula for gravity. This would mean that where a pre-modern cosmology simply *presupposes* that there is a sexual relation, Science would be the one to set out to *write it*. Or, as Lacan comically yet revealingly puts it in Seminar XX (*Encore*), “one could, in a pinch, write xRy , x being man, y being woman, and R being the sexual relation, but that would be stupid [*bête*: alternatively, ‘brute’].”³³

Nonetheless, this is what Science aims at doing all of the time, either in the form of an actually-existing “biological” rendering the real of sex in terms of chromosomes (i.e., the writing of XX or XY), or, in Freud’s case, “agnostically” granting that there could be a sexual relation—and a way of writing it—afforded by the Science of the future *in spite* of the fundamental insight of psychoanalysis. In short, psychoanalysis—at least in the way that Lacan recuperates Freud—is precisely *contrary* to this arbitrary will of Science.³⁴ Moreover, the lack of a formula for sex—the possibility of writing the sexual relation—amounts to a “*refus au savoir*,” a refusal of knowledge, as the above example demonstrates. In this sense, psychoanalysis functions as a possible bulwark with respect

32 For a more robust account of Freud and Lacan’s respective “theories of science,” see Milner’s *L’Œuvre claire*, Ch.2. Lacan argues in *L’Étourdit* that for Freudian psychoanalysis “there is no sexual relation” amounts to a saying (*dire*) that remains forgotten behind what is said (*dit*). In other words, Freud failed to stipulate the empirical manifestations of sexual discordance as a transcendental account of the absence of the sexual relation.

33 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 36; 35.

34 As stated in Seminar XVII: “*Marche! Continue à toujours savoir*.” Jacques Lacan, *Livre XVII: L’Envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 121; 105.

to the accumulation of knowledge by virtue of its reference to the truth of the absence of a sexual relation. It does not seek out the "truth about knowledge" of sex in the manner of pre-modern *connaissance*, but rather demonstrates a knowledge *about* truth as "a fundamentally *lateral position*" (SXII: 287;249).³⁵ As Lacan puts it:

The truth is to be said about sex, and it is because it is impossible - this is in Freud's text - because the position of the analyst is impossible, that is why [...] there flows from it this suspense, weakness, of secular incoherence in knowledge, which is properly the one that Descartes denounces and articulates in order to detach from it his certainty about the subject, by which the subject is manifested as being precisely the signal, the test, the remainder of this lack of knowledge, through which he rejoins what bound him, what refuses itself to knowledge, in the sex on which the subject finds himself suspended in the pure form of this lack, namely as desexualised entity (SXII:287;249).

Put another way, then, Freudian experience registers the impossibility of saying the truth about sex. This impossibility is double: the truth about sex *is to be said* but *cannot be said*. The analyst's position—the one meant to sustain or receive that truth—is itself impossible. The "suspense" Lacan mentions later follows from this. Here, Lacan attributes to this impossibility of sexual truth a "weakness" in knowledge itself, hence a "secular incoherence." That is, there is a necessary, intrinsic gap in the very order of knowledge, and this incoherence is *not accidental* but constitutive. It is "secular" insofar as it concerns the entire field of modern *savoir qua* human knowledge, not only religious or metaphysical truth (whether ancient or modern). It is no surprise, then, that Lacan links this "secular incoherence" to the very operation of the Cartesian *cogito*. Descartes, he says, *denounces* this incoherence: he isolates it, thematises it, in order to *detach* from it the *certainty* of the *cogito*; he ensures certainty *by excluding* this incoherence. The *cogito* is thus inaugurated by cutting away from the field of knowledge that "refuses itself" to it. In the final analysis, the *cogito* is the subjective "scaffolding," the point at which the subject sustains itself only through the exclusion of the real (i.e., the absence of the sexual relation). Yet with Freud, this exclusion no longer guarantees *certainty* but becomes the very motor of knowledge. Psychoanalysis is thus set against the foreclosure of truth characteristic of both Science and capital, each of which, for the later Lacan, entails

35 These remarks are the textual basis for what Lorenzo Chiesa calls 'para-ontology', namely a lateral ontology founded in the truth of incompleteness *rather than* in the privileging of certainty over truth. Para-ontology is developed by Chiesa in Lorenzo, Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

a rejection of castration structurally homologous to that foreclosure.³⁶ Both capitalism and modern Science foreclose the truth of at least Lacanian (if not implicitly Freudian) psychoanalysis, i.e., the truth of the absence of a sexual relation for the human species. The only way for psychoanalysis to be *anti-capitalist*, and from this perspective, *truly* psychoanalytic, is to be *methodologically anti-Cartesian*.

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³⁶ Regarding the rejection of castration, see for instance the discussion in SXIXB. Jacques Lacan, *Je parle aux murs* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), 96; 40-1.