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**Political Therapy:**

**Psychoanalysis and Politics between Wittgenstein and Lacan**

By

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Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which… we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be home in the world

*-Hannah Arendt[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictious ones

-*Ludwig Wittgenstein[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In the social sciences, several conceptual dualisms imported from traditional philosophy continue to divide theorists and schools of thought alike: subjective/objective, mind/body, fact/opinion. As traditional disciplinary boundaries have become increasingly nebulous and inter-penetrated, meta-theoretical interventions characteristic of ‘the philosophy of social sciences’ have become increasingly incorporated into social scientific inquiry itself. Nowhere is the blurred boundary between philosophy and (social) science more apparent than in the domain of critical political theory. Moreover, the problematization of the subjective vs. objective has become a substantive mainstay beyond practices of critique, as these categories are continually re-signified as sites of normative contestation. How ought one to distinguish between science, politics, and philosophy, and what might this mean for contemporary political theory? Moreover, what possibly could recourse to such a discredited, un-scientific, and non-objective practice such as psychoanalysis have to offer in clarifying this relation?

Outside of academia, the pervasive feeling of political anomie and anger might suggest that an abstract reflection on politics and psychoanalysis, a focus on substantive boundaries between various academic fields, or a concern with clarifying methodological best-practices all amount to prime examples of esoteric intellectualism run amok. In a time of global politico-medical crisis, is such an intervention not decidedly a distraction from focusing on the political matter at hand? These concerns are well-founded and point to several pitfalls I hope to avoid. Nonetheless, the rise of a global pandemic has done nothing if not highlight a gap in our understanding about the role that science and “objective”/factual claims play in political discourse. Political subjectivities, ideological attachments, and “viewpoints” seem ever more insulated from rational argumentation and impervious to external criticism.

This is a phenomenon with which the political theorist has long contended, a problem that they have occasionally looked to political theory itself to solve (or at least mitigate). I propose one possible answer to this dilemma can be found by looking to Stanley Cavell’s popular therapeutic reading of the later Wittgenstein’s anti-philosophical, anti-theoretical method of investigation. In doing so, I propose the term *political therapy*, bringing together two distinct fields: psychoanalysis and politics. My intervention in the discourse offers a contribution by juxtaposing the work of thinkers not often brought into conversation: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Lacan.

While there is a wealth of scholarship that has brought into conversation the psychoanalytic tradition and the later Wittgenstein’s philosophy, few have looked to incorporate the work of Lacan into the conversation. Jacque Bouveresse was the first to capture the dynamic between Freud and Wittgenstein, contributing a comprehensive collection of the scattered remarks the philosopher made in lecture notes, un-published journals, and transcriptions of his many conversations with Rush Rhees.[[3]](#footnote-3) Bouveresse ultimately found the discordances to far outweigh the similarities. Many (perhaps most) subsequent interpreters arrived at the same conclusion. Today, most Wittgenstein scholars remain highly skeptical of psychoanalysis, tending to use the juxtapositions to repudiate the later through the method of the former. Perhaps the most long-standing and vocal member of this group, Frank Cioffi, has extensively criticized Freud from a Wittgensteinian perspective, specifically challenging the psychoanalytic model of mind and raising doubts about its impertinent claims about “the scientific method.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In a significant departure from these readings, Gordon Baker has argued that profound similarities exist between the methodological commitments that ground the approach of both Freud and Wittgenstein, with an emphasis on Wittgenstein’s personal and intellectual proximity to the psychoanalyst Friedrich Waismann.[[5]](#footnote-5)

While scholars whose work is more grounded in Lacanian psychanalysis have more frequently interposed the discourses of Wittgenstein and Lacan, they typically do so with exclusive considerations of the *Tractatus*. Maria Balaska has argued that many affinities exist between Wittgenstein and Lacan in regards to meaning, importance, language, and human finitude.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, over the past decade, some have re-animated the dynamic of this juxtaposition in the Wittgensteinian literature. Paul M. Livingston concords with the assessment of Balaska, while also managing to incorporate some material of the later Wittgenstein on “forms of life.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Moreover, even some normative political theorists have incorporated aspects of both Lacan and Wittgenstein’s thought into their work. This is most notably the case in the work of theorists such as Aletta Norval and David R. Horwarth, both of whom share a commitment to a radical democratic tradition, occasionally formulated in terms of an ontological subject of lack, while also taking significant influence from the later Wittgenstein.

Nonetheless, there are virtually no sustained or comprehensive considerations of the relation between Wittgenstein and Lacan in political thought. As such, my intervention in no way seeks to contribute anything like an exhaustive comparison, but rather to emphasize a few over-looked aspects that are relevant to politics. With that in mind, I do not consider many of the conceptual categories typically associated with Lacan (*Jouissance*, desire, *Objet Petit a*, etc.) and I do not seek to evaluate his “theory of language” from the perspective of the later Wittgenstein. Rather, my emphasis is on the relation between categories such as subjective/objective, truth and knowledge, and the relation between science, philosophy, and politics- all of which are inter-related and dealt with throughout the paper.

In vastly different approaches, both Wittgenstein and Lacan were concerned with how to get people to see things in a different way than they currently do- either because they cannot see differently, are stuck in their ways, or simply will not acknowledge that they can and/or do. Thus, I situate the two traditions of thought by focusing on their respective positions regarding the substantive quality that *importance* and *significance* obtain within them. Can a political theory really make an impression, and (if/when it does so) is the impression one that places the level of meaning in the right place, or does it misdirect? How is it that one could come to see something as *significant* or *important* in a way they previously did not? Both of these pragmatic questions contain an implicit meta-theoretical counterpart: what, exactly, ought we to expect a political theory to do for us?

**(Social) Science and its Philosophical Foundations**

*Freudo-Marxism and the Birth of Critical Theory*

A perennial debate amongst Wittgenstein scholars involves the relation between the social sciences and the natural sciences, and the role that either/both of these have in relation to philosophy. On the broadest level, widespread substantive agreement exists that the social scientist ought not to look to the natural sciences for a model or explanatory ideal to guide their intellectual pursuits. Yet, the nature of the question requires further clarification. I begin by situating the matter in the discourse of critical theory, which grounds the juxtaposition I then go on to offer between Wittgenstein and Lacan.

The inaugural thinkers of the first generation of the Frankfurt school, who (*very* loosely) can be described as Freudo-Marxists, offered a programmatic approach to social criticism marked by a novel imbrication of philosophical and social scientific methods.[[8]](#footnote-8) With this trademark brand of methodological and substantive hybridity, Critical Theory launched an attack on the arid scientism that grounded positivistic methodologies. Here, the well-known narrative of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a helpful point of departure: since the enlightenment, the scientific method elevated itself to become a totalizing locus of knowledge; it presented itself as not just a “method” but *the* method- the single evaluative metric for establishing any and all valid truth-claims regardless of the interpretive task at hand.[[9]](#footnote-9) On this view, the reification of social relations as object relations in western capitalism meant that all human (social, cultural, political) production could be grasped in a philosophical gestalt.

Wittgenstein, in his later work, by no means rejected the scientific method *tout court*, nor did he portray it as a rationalizing tool of social domination like Adorno & Horkheimer (A&H). However, he did share their commitment to a critique of what can be called “scientism.” Although he never actually used the term “scientism” himself (instead describing the “scientific method”, “scientific questions”, “scientific investigation”), he was critical of the broad trend that scientific explanations were frequently over-generalized into domains vastly different from the natural or physical sciences in/for which these methods originated.[[10]](#footnote-10) As he put it, science had elevated itself to the status of a “particular method [that] elbows aside all the others.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Rather than relying on a single unitary method, Wittgenstein emphasized the importance of different modes of inquiry as valid in different contexts and in different usages of language (ethics, philosophy, religion, etc.) He rejected, then, as David Rubinstein notes, “the doctrine that scientific explanation is unitary and that the methods and objectives of the natural sciences can be applied, without significant alteration, to the study of human society.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Importantly, though, Wittgenstein did not resort, as did the critical theorist, to elaborating a broad philosophical program, and his critique of scientism was grounded in a commitment against generalities: “Our craving for generality has another main source: our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws.”[[13]](#footnote-13) As a substantive claim, this reads as something A&H very well might have said about contemporary social thought; as a methodological precept, though, it serves as a fairly clear description of what they nonetheless (purposefully) followed. Thus, while critical theorists may have rejected that ineluctable laws of capitalist development were deterministic, in the vulgar economistic terms of 19th century Marxism, they maintained a commitment to providing highly general, over-arching narratives. We can, thus, draw the first important distinction between Wittgenstein’s critique of positivism and nomothetic inquiry and the critique of instrumental reason provided by the first-generation theorists of the Frankfurt school: the latter relied upon broad philosophical argumentations and tended to seek highly general explanations.

Wittgenstein’s method resists the all-too-human temptation to conceptualize something called “society” as a closed, totalizing domain; instead, he describes an ensemble of practices to be approached in context-specific language-games. In referring to language-games, I take up Alice Crary’s understanding that no clear-cut, fixed boundaries exist between a “language-game” and the real-world objects that are described within it.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, Wittgenstein does not so much describe language-games as invent possible ones for specific purposes. Indeed, his purpose lies in imagining (though *not* “hypothesizing”) language-games in particular circumstances in response to conceptual confusions. The “language-game”, though, is merely an intellectual framework for describing a circumstance, and descriptive frameworks do not change the observed phenomena itself. This is an important point, for Wittgenstein is concerned with how one might come to see something differently than they currently do. He insists, though, that such a change is purely perceptual; it is a change in *you*.

*Science and “Significance”*

So far, Wittgenstein seems primarily concerned with the normative question of whether the natural sciences ought to guide social scientific thinking; however, this glosses another important point which is that he seemed to think that science simply *did not* guide one’s thinking, at least not in the way that they tended to think. In part, this involves the well-known concept of “aspect-seeing” or the “lighting up of an aspect.” This second, occasionally overlooked, dimension of Wittgenstein’s critique of “scientism” is far more consequential for our present discussion as it directly involves questions of *importance* and *significance*.

Can investigations that are tied to scientific methods invite one to see something as important or significant in a way that they previously did not? Of course, it certainly *can*. However, Wittgenstein tended to emphasize that such methods had limited ability to un-settle one’s perspective or to motivate one to see an aspect in a different way. He was critical both of the inclination that one has to look to singular objective “facts” or metaphysical mystifications that so often were the products of the scientist or the epistemologist, respectively. This is not because he did not find the arguments to be legitimate, but that he recognized that whether or not something accords with its precepts of what constitutes a valid “fact” is often not likely to incite someone to notice a new perspective about the object or field of study or to see in it a new aspect that makes the question meaningful and significant in some new way.

Wittgenstein was not interested in using philosophy to verify science, and a confirmed or accepted scientific consensus is neither all there is to know nor a unique form of discourse that itself is the one and only way to get someone to see something. This was not the only means of establishing or gaining some new sort of insight but merely a way providing what we know within the constraints of what we can prove based upon the established grounds of its method: “I may find scientific questions interesting, but they can never really grip me. Only conceptual and aesthetic questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, initially was *more* than “gripping” for the young Wittgenstein. Rush Rhees notes that from a very young age, “Wittgenstein described himself as a ‘disciple of Freud’”, noting that “for the rest of his life Freud was one of the few authors he thought worth reading.”[[16]](#footnote-16) However, it is also clear that Wittgenstein did not, in any way, consider psychoanalysis to meet the criteria of “science” as the word is often used in the practices of, say, physics. One of the major disputes that Wittgenstein had with Freudian thought was its spurious appropriation of the natural and physical sciences as a model for what was in, fact, a philosophical investigation: “what Freud says about the sub-conscious sounds like science but in fact is merely a manner of speaking which could be discarded without any challenge to what Freud is saying.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is imperative to point out that as regards the question of meaning and importance, Wittgenstein was simply not interested in whether or not something could be proven as scientifically valid. Thus, his criticisms of Freud’s “pseudo-explanations”[[18]](#footnote-18) did not rest on the assumption that Freud, say, could be vindicated in the future if only more “scientific” evidence could be found (empirical, experimental, or rational- whichever you like) that confirmed or disconfirmed the veracity of his formulations. Rather, the Freudian “un-conscious” was conceptually distinct from a scientific claim or a propositional statement that could be verified or disproven; the analytical object of the field was not the kind of thing about which one could make scientific claims at all. The Freudian un-conscious was what Wittgenstein referred to as a “picture” of the world, which is to say a “system of reference” or a “notation”- a way of organizing and categorizing the objects around you in a specific way.[[19]](#footnote-19) These sorts of schematic “pictures” cannot themselves be proven to be true or false by showing that they are incorrect. They are potentially useful ways of organizing information. Wittgenstein’s critique, rather, was that, once accepted, a particular “picture” tends to reify itself in our thought. His aim was to get someone to adopt different “pictures” and to show that none of them were individually necessary interpretive frameworks.[[20]](#footnote-20)

*Lacan, Science and Philosophy*

Lacan is often dismissed outright as perpetuating conceptual confusions about the scientific status of psychoanalysis and its picture of the un-conscious. Thus, it has long been widely assumed that a discussion of Lacan from a Wittgensteinian perspective cannot get us anywhere that a discussion of Freud has not already clarified. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Lacan sought a reconstruction of psychoanalysis-as-science, only this time, instead of taking the natural sciences as an explanatory ideal, he variously looked to structural linguistics and/or to the formal-logical foundations of mathematics and theoretical physics.[[21]](#footnote-21) It may very well be true that such affinities did, in fact, widen the gulf between Wittgensteinian therapeutic methods and Psychoanalytic discourse. However, pointing to selective, highly general tendencies in Lacan’s thought or to broad sets of (often conflictual) methodological commitments that he undertook does not explain much about Lacan’s method of psychoanalysis; it clarifies even less about the potential for bringing Wittgenstein and Lacan into conversation. My aim in this section, then, is straightforward: to suggest that when, for example, Rupert Read asks “is it acceptable that the natural sciences offer explanatory ideals for the social sciences…”, we should indeed include Lacan in the conversation.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Lacan’s relation to scientism is more complicated than it might seem, and it remains an issue that many of his devotees struggle to resolve. On the one hand, it is un-deniable that Lacan maintained scientistic affinities and that his work is littered with scientific affectations (“mathemes”, “sinthomes”, idiosyncratic neologisms and even more highly idiosyncratic graphical depictions) all of which indicate that Lacan took science, or the language of science, as an explanatory ideal or model. Indeed, he himself made this admission on numerous occasions: “mathematical formalism is our goal or ideal.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Despite his professed aim of formalizing psychoanalysis as a science, he remained a passionate critic of “scientism” throughout his career. In particular, he incessantly launched polemics at psychology and cognitive scientists, and even made a habit out of speaking at conferences of the psychoanalytic establishment in order to launch scathing critiques of its misguided adherents. In one of his frequent diatribes against such disciplines as associationist psychology, he portrayed them as committing a categorical, conceptual error in their thought: “the very pregiveness of the phenomena that are purportedly explained here is thus smuggled into the explanatory concept. And this involves a veritable conceptual sleight of hand.[[24]](#footnote-24) Here, Lacan is describing a type of conceptual confusion that goes on when psychoanalytic theories are grounded in certain scientific conceptions/fields: in particular, cognitive neuroscience, biology, and phylogenetic discourses- discourses that were in many ways widely embraced by Freud throughout his career.[[25]](#footnote-25) Lacan’s polemic on these forms of inquiry was that none of them could adequately grapple with the question of meaning or subjectivity.

Moreover, as early as in 1936, then, he made such claims and as well rejected the sterility of academia, which he took to epitomize and institutionalize intellectualist approaches: “…the practical successes of this science conferred upon it a brilliant prestige…leading everyman to bow to this new idol called Scientism, and leading scholars to the eternal pedantry that mutilates what they are able to grasp of reality because they do not realize how much of this truth is relative to the laws of their tower.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Here, Lacan is rhetorically channeling the Rousseau of the First and Second Discourses; indeed, much like Rousseau, he seems to derive a good deal of pleasure from these reprimands. The point, though, is that Lacan’s position with regards to scientism is rife with contradictions, the nuance of which cannot be reductively captured by pointing to his penchant for formalism and the mathematical conceptual presentation of his thought.

How is one to account, then, for the ostensible discrepancy between his commitment to establishing a scientific basis for psychoanalysis and his occasional admissions that, say, “physics is but a mental fabrication.”?[[27]](#footnote-27) What becomes clear is that certain distinctions need to be made regarding the various levels on which criticisms of Lacan stand, for these conceptual challenges too often get collapsed into a general set of tendencies of supposed infractions.

As is well-known, Lacan’s primary frustration with “science” is that it did not provide a discourse within which one could adequately discuss and analyze human subjective action.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is indeed the case that Lacan frequently insisted upon Freudian un-conscious as a discovery of the utmost scientific import. It is a common mis-characterization, though, to claim that he simply took as a pre-formed model the physical or natural sciences in generating and then supporting the theory of the un-conscious. Indeed, it was precisely *because* these modes of inquiry were not capable of addressing the domain of “subjectivity” that he often eschewed them or at least modified them in ways that made them un-recognizable to “traditional” scientists. This is to say that “scientific discourse” as it presently stood was not capable of incorporating subjectivity into its account, and therefore the discourse needed to change in order to meet the needs of the present day.[[29]](#footnote-29) For this, he was not only harshly renounced by the so-called hard-sciences community, but he was rejected by the psychoanalytic establishment itself- whose concerns he actively repudiated.

One highly informative departure from the somewhat hasty general dismissals of Lacan is offered elsewhere by Rupert Read: “Lacan is likely to confuse us if we try to read him, as I admit it is unfortunately reasonably natural to do, as a psychosomaticist, as someone trying, absurdly, as cognitive science does, to discover things about meaning by looking at the mind.”[[30]](#footnote-30) His ultimate criticism of the Lacanian project is, then, far more attentive to *what* this process actually entails than many others: “…is the unconscious structured like a language? Again, perhaps yes, - if we understand by language what Lacan asks us to.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Here Read provides a decisively Wittgensteinian reading, which echoes with all the resonance of Wittgenstein’s famous opening criticism of G.E. Moore “if you do know that *here is one hand,* we’ll grant you all the rest.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Indeed, many of Wittgenstein’s thought experiments in the *Investigations* follow this type of trajectory: a ‘philosophical’ claim is presented, and a situation is “imagined” that would fit the premise in order to highlight just how specific and detached it would need to be to correspond.

*Lacanian Anti-Philosophy*

What is more importantly missed in the theoretical literature is Lacan’s relation to the history of various traditions of Western philosophy- most notably epistemology. Amongst Wittgenstein scholars in particular, a crucial point tends to be over-looked or, in some cases, mis-understood: the anti-philosophical commitments of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The general picture of Lacanian thought is that he presented a psychoanalytic process with much affinity for the basic presuppositions of the theorists of the Vienna circle. This suggests that his ultimate aim was to formalize a mathematical ideal-discourse that could abet all inquiry. If this turns out to be the case, such commitments would, perhaps, account for some of his anti-philosophical, anti-metaphysical excurses- that he, following Comte, wanted to construct a discourse beyond philosophy and science (which if we call psychoanalysis, then it does seem this is partially his outlook).[[33]](#footnote-33)

As a general description, this may well be true. Again, though, Lacan is far more nuanced on the matter than one might assume. For one, he was specifically critical of logical positivism, criticizing the formalisms that grounded its claims: “the heresy that leads logical positivism in search of the ‘meaning of meaning’ as its objective is called.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Such a pronouncement seems to run counter to the stereotypical picture of Lacan in political thought.

Lacan’s countering of the tendency to focus on the “meaning of meaning” sounds odd for a theorist most known for discussing the relation of ‘signifiers to signifiers.’ Moreover, his statement here echoes a key Wittgensteinian point throughout the first section of the *Investigations*, in which he describes how the “general concept of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Wittgenstein’s criticism of traditional epistemology here is, again, that it results in conceptual confusions by asking questions like “what is the *general* ‘meaning’ of the word “handle”, rather than investigating how the word is used in various contexts. A general, universal epistemological category of the “meaning of meaning” is a mystifying question in most ordinary language contexts. Wittgenstein’s criticisms were anti-philosophical, then, in that he claimed that philosophers tended to present these questions as though they had arisen organically in a domain where they were, in fact, never raised.

While well-known, Lacan’s highly polemical attacks against the tradition of philosophy are rarely drawn into conversation with other anti-philosophical dispositions. This is an important over-sight. Justin Clemens’ pathbreaking work on this matter was one of the first to highlight this aspect of Lacan’s work, pointing out that philosophy (for Lacan), “ …is the paradigm of an attempt to establish a knowing-knowing-itself-knowing, a total knowledge.”[[36]](#footnote-36) His criticisms, here, follow Wittgenstein in an un-appreciated way: “Philosophy orients us towards the proper objects and terms of study, but it does so in a way that falsifies their importance and…. exacerbates misunderstanding.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

While Lacan’s critiques of traditional metaphysics and epistemology are indeed intriguing, the comparison with Wittgenstein only goes so far. Of course, the important distinction that cannot go un-remarked, is that Lacan leveled his critique of traditional epistemological theories in order to go on to offer his own epistemologically-inflected theories as well. This, as is a well-established point, is a significant gap between the two thinkers.

**Language and Discourse**

*Structure and the “theory of language”*

Until this point, as might be painfully clear, I have bracketed the countless well-known criticisms of the Lacanian field in order to facilitate the conversation with Wittgenstein. As a result, I have not addressed some of the more common debates involving his co-optation of structural linguistics and anthropology. Moreover, the emphasis I have placed on Wittgenstein’s attitude to “science” perhaps has glossed the more fundamental point of contention about his attitude toward “theory” in general. On the face of it, this approach might seem decidedly odd. Is not the centrality of language to the thought of both Lacan and Wittgenstein the most obvious point of comparison with which to situate the two in conversation? Indeed, this might be the case. However, the relations to be drawn from comparing Lacan’s “theory of language” with Wittgenstein’s discussion of language (which did not include a “theory” of language) are somewhat obvious and have been addressed by a variety of theorists. As such, I will only briefly touch upon the topic before moving on to a more specific consideration regarding Lacan’s understanding of discourse.

As is well-known, Lacan’s formal edifice was grounded in a reformulation and appropriation of Suassurean linguistics for the field of psychoanalysis, both of which tendencies can be found in some of his most oft-cited pronouncements (“the unconscious is structured like a language.”) The most common way of handling the dilemma is the assertion that Lacan was a structuralist, but, it is claimed, a structuralist of a different kind, one who presents a more radical potential for subverting the rigidity of most other formal structural accounts and offering an alternative to the more un-satisfying subjectivist solutions that post-structuralism has initiated (irreducible dispersion of identity, de-centered centers, etc.) Christian Lundberg, for example, offers the term ‘structure without determination,’ arguing that Lacan offers a “reading notable for both its emphasis on a formal and affective economy” which “hazards an alternative to the assumption… that the human subject is a cog in a machine of difference or that it is endowed with a virtually deific agential capacities.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Likewise, Jason Glynos portrays Lacanian structure as highly idiosyncratic, a mode of theorization that subverts the formalist traps of structure in transcendental a-prioristic modes of thinking: “His [Lacan’s] theoretical approach does not follow the inductive method”, emphasizing that Lacan “is far more invested in inventing conceptual structures than in inductively introducing more and more objects under its terrain.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Or, as Slavoj Zizek puts it, on the question of structural determination in Lacan, “we can have our cake and eat it.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Many of these characterizations are compelling as descriptions of what it is Lacan aimed at. However, what has become increasingly clear via the political Lacanians is just how limited that attempt often can be for thinking politically.

Far more interesting to consider is the way in which both Lacan and Wittgenstein re-formulated the boundary between the individual and the collective, the subjective and the objective. In this way, inter-subjectivity is important in both accounts. As I will discuss below in Lacan’s *Four Discourses*, inter-subjective identification, for Lacan, is constitutive not just of one’s sense of self but is determinant of one’s relation to knowledge and truth. Because I am not interested in defending or rejecting the Lacanian theory of the “barred subject”, I do not take up this issue as it usually emerges in Lacanian political thought. Thus, I am not interested in approaching the matter as a philosophical question nor in elaborating on (or criticizing) the validity of the notion of an ontological condition of constitutive lack. Rather than focusing on the “theory” of *language*, I emphasize Lacan’s view of *discourse*, which offers significant resources for a conversation with Wittgenstein’s “forms of life”. It is important to note that central to both accounts is the communal nature of language and a conception of subjectivity as constituted in language.

\* \* \* \*

*Lacan’s “Discourse of the Master”*

Having suggested that Wittgenstein and Lacan occupy a similar anti-philosophical horizon, I now look to bring their thought into a more active conversation. Many have pointed out, at the level of substantive content, that Wittgenstein does not offer any systematic theory in the *Investigations*. However, a therapeutic reading considers a less obvious point: it is equally important to consider the inter-subjective relation between you (as the reader) and Wittgenstein (as the speaker/philosopher). It is of the utmost significance that Wittgenstein’s presentation of his ideas takes the fragmentary, non-systematic form of an interlocutory exchange. There is a crucial symbiosis between form (or style) and content (or substance). Indeed, the conclusions or lessons we might derive for (potential) application in political theory will depend heavily on our ability to recognize that something peculiar is going on here. One can draw out these implications in an important way, by looking to Lacan’s understanding of discourse.

Some of the more interesting current scholarship on the *Investigations* has focused on the role of Wittgenstein as the speaker. Most notably, Rupert Read has suggested the importance of an hermeneutical reading of the text using the language of critical literary theory.[[41]](#footnote-41) In doing so, he suggested that the Wittgenstein (or, rather, the “speaker” throughout the text) can be considered on the model of “the un-reliable narrator”, who offers no interpretive bannisters for readers- but only conceptual confusions. He even goes so far as to invoke Rousseau by arguing that this “forces one to be free” as reader, to interpret the text in their own way.[[42]](#footnote-42) This is a highly astute reading; yet, even though it is a bit over the top, it actually understates the point. For while Read points to a dynamic, the metaphor seems a bit off. In the most literal senses, the authorial Wittgenstein in the Investigations is not exactly a narrator, nor, in fact, is he un-reliable. As the term usually goes, un-reliable connotes a narrative voice who we *cannot trust*, whose interpretations of the narrative events are distorted in some way (think: Benito Cereno, Faulkner’s “Benjy”, Humbert Humbert, etc.). Perhaps the most exemplary precedent in the philosophical tradition would be Kierkegaard, whose pseudonymous writings purposefully sought to lead through indirection and narration. My point is not to raise a pedantic criticism of Read’s account, for his reading does in fact do a lot in its attempt to capture something about the Investigations that often goes overlooked. Indeed, I look to follow his lead here. I suggest, though, that a more apt metaphor for the phenomenon he is trying to grasp can be found in Lacan’s Four Discourses.

Lacan most forcefully articulates his understanding of “discourse” in *Seminar XVII: On the Other Side of Psychoanalysis* by presenting the theory of “the four discourses”; here, I will focus on just two of them: the “Discourse of the Master” and the “Discourse of the University.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Broadly speaking, the former describes a Lacanian language-game (what he would call a “discourse”) in which the “master” can be understood as, say, a school teacher who gives commands (“do this! Stop that!”); the latter focuses on a language-game in which the subject’s role is to reproduce “knowledge” (though not creating new knowledge).[[44]](#footnote-44) In both of these cases, he uses the term “discourse” to try to understand something about the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another, or from one group to another, etc. This is why language is so central to Lacan’s psychoanalytic method, for it is only in and through “language” that “knowledge” can be communicated between subjects.

These discourses are fundamental to the analytic experience that Lacan describes. In psychoanalysis, the fact that the analytic relationship between analyst and patient obtains the therapeutic value that it does is dependent upon the patient’s assumption that the analyst *knows* something that they (the patient) does not. That the words of the analyst obtain the gravitas that they do, first and foremost, is because the patient recognizes that the analyst speaks as a Master, “that is, as [the] birdbrain”, a concession which is made specifically because the patient seeks in the process to be “lead to knowledge.”[[45]](#footnote-45) In other words, the truth-effect of the discourse for the subject is predicated upon his subjective orientation to the analyst who is presumed to know something that the subject does not. What this means, though, is that the subject assumes the position of one who *lacks* the capacity for valid interpretation; he is not authorized, here, to be the one who knows. More precisely, the patient’s interpretation can only be valid if the Master validates it. This point has often been levelled as a way of discrediting the validity of psychoanalysis. Frank Cioffi, for example, has pointed out that the efficacy of the psychoanalytic therapy relies upon the patient accepting the interpretation of the analyst as true, and in doing so, the patient orients themselves to the master by taking on the position of the pupil; without the analyst occupying this position the language-game would never begin.[[46]](#footnote-46)

However, these conditions are precisely what it is that Lacan wanted to *overcome*, and this is how he distinguished his psychoanalytic method from others. Although his method, here, differs from Wittgenstein’s procedure in important ways, it is often over-looked that they were concerned with a similar problem. As counter-intuitive as it might initially seem, the reason that Lacan used such “fictitious” constructions of mathematical language is because it allowed one, he thought, to step outside of the inter-subjective limitations that obtain in our everyday use of language: “Lacan for one claimed that with mathemes there is no master’s interpretation- in other words there is no right interpretation. This is the political lesson of Lacan’s mathemes- you are permitted/allowed to know.” With that in mind, at least some Wittgensteinian criticisms of psychoanalysis (such as those offered by the likes of Frank Cioffi) might not hold for a criticism of Lacan. At the very least, the criticisms are perhaps somewhat hastily applied before a deeper understanding of Lacan’s procedure has been undertaken.

An obvious point of contention arises, though, as to why Lacan (and essentially every Lacanian theorist since his time has followed him in this) thought that there was such a thing as a “limitation” on one’s ability to understand or interpret the world in everyday language. This is, indeed, radically opposed to a Wittgensteinian procedure, which looks to “ordinary language” itself as the solution to our conceptual confusions. It is often suggested that Lacan’s view on the “limit” inherent in discourses is something that he attributed to a structural condition of language as such- that the very structure of language itself is inherently limited and that a certain degree of mis-communication necessarily inscribes any and all subjects to a perpetual condition of mis-identification and misunderstanding.

This interpretation certainly accords with many of Lacan’s early seminars, in which he espoused a structural linguistic view of inter-subjective communication. However, this is something he notably abandoned in his later years. At that time, he attributed the notion of “lack” not to an ontological condition of the subject, nor to an epistemological limit that obtained in a structural account of language as-such, but, rather, this was a product of inter-subjective relations: “language only exists in the social convention of speakers. Discourse is thus an intrinsically social bond not only because it involves…two subjects, but also because it distributes relations between them prior to any particular act of speech: for there to be speakers, this distribution must already have taken place.”[[47]](#footnote-47) In light of this reading of Lacan, a psychoanalysis based on an understanding of language as a principal bond between members of a community can help re-direct our attention by focusing on inter-subjective relations. It is only within certain conventional discourses, certain uses of language, that we encounter something like a limit, not something that is inherent to a structure of language as such. While I understand that this is a fairly heterodox interpretation of Lacan’s work, it is one that does adequately capture what it is he hoped psychoanalysis might offer us- an ability to develop a sense of agency, and the resources to re-direct our attention to the *relations* that limit us rather than to accept that we are necessarily limited as beings and doomed to a lack of knowledge.

*Investigations* and the Missing Master

This reading of Lacanian discourse can be used to highlight a key point about Wittgenstein’s anti-philosophical procedure in the *Investigations.* Seen in this way, the *Investigations* avoids the common tendency of the philosopher (and, as I will suggest, the political theorist) to assume the position of what Lacan might call the “subject supposed to know” – or, in other words, the position of the Master.[[48]](#footnote-48) One could say that, in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein purposefully refuses to occupy the position of “the subject-supposed-to-know”; he does not establish, in the pages of the text, anything that would resemble either “the Master’s discourse” or “the University discourse.”

But wait- can one *assume* the position of “the subject-supposed-to-know” for *oneself*? Is it not, rather, a status that he obtains (or does not) only within a particular language-game; is it not precisely the *interlocutor’s gaze* that confers the relative position on one? As a general psychoanalytic rule or precept, that sounds correct (which is to say, that is generally how Lacan meant for the point to be interpreted). However, while one cannot assign oneself to this position, he can (and often does) *assume* it. Indeed, one can imagine (with little effort) a person who perhaps consciously acts in conventional “Master-like” ways to elicit the interlocutor’s tacit acknowledgment of one’s Mastery. The philosophical point is much more complex, but I am not concerned with elaborating the full scope of the argument here.

It suffices to say that philosophers have almost always assumed that this was their position in relation to society; Lacan even goes so far as to describe “the Master’s discourse” *as* “the philosopher’s discourse.” Indeed, it seems perhaps to be an intrinsic part of the very definition of philosopher in the western tradition, such that to designate oneself as a philosopher just *is* to claim the position of the (zen)-Master. As a result, both the reader and the philosopher tend to automatically assume that this is the inter-subjective dynamic at play without really questioning it in (any) individual cases.

This is precisely the dynamic that Wittgenstein seems to want to subvert in his later writings, and this is one of the reasons that the *Investigations* takes the form that it does. It is not for nothing that the most common cast of characters to emerge throughout so many of the *Investigations’* language-games are the teacher and pupil, instructor and instructed, rule-giver and rule-follower, etc. In other words, in many cases, Wittgenstein’s language-games approximate a clear-cut scenario of a Lacanian “discourse of the master”, and in almost every case, to some degree, what is revealed is the precariousness of the master’s position, such that the master constantly feels thwarted in his ability to control the interpretation of his commands. The issue at hand in so many of these cases is something to do with the transmission of knowledge. At the same time, Wittgenstein is often at great pains to clarify some important distinctions about whether or not these examples ought to be classified as cases in which “learning” is taking place, or if it resembles a process of “training” an un-initialed member into a form of life. Many cases follow a similar trajectory; the builder gives orders or the teacher gives a formula to be followed (bring me a slab!), he is assumed to be the subject who knows, he occupies the position from which a correct interpretation is determined.

The fragmentary passages of the *Investigations* are not articulated in a way that lends itself to the master’s discourse or the university discourse. This is important clarification for considering the utility of a therapeutic political theory. As numerous commentators have noted (and as I have indicated above) the *Investigations* does not offer any new information, data, or facts; it provides nothing in the way of empirical findings nor deduces or reconstructs implied principles as necessary conditions of possibility, etc.

Yet Wittgenstein *himself* does not occupy the position as philosopher in relation to the reader. This is precisely where his anti-philosophical allegiances are so important. As Cavell notes: “in the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoureau…, we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy.”[[49]](#footnote-49) In contrast, Wittgenstein’s method of imagined language-games, or what Cavell calls “the invitation to imagine a context”, the reader no longer needs to occupy the relation of “pupil” or “trainee.” His position is not one of who knows anything you do not, nor is he trying to inform you or even teach you anything in particular. He is not the teacher withholding the answer and guiding you to find it or allowing for many different opinions on what he transmits.

What Cavell’s Wittgenstein invites us to ask ourselves is what, exactly, does the philosopher as the subject-supposed-to-know actually *know* that the rest of us do not? It is certainly not, say, any necessary positive knowledge. The very significance of being the subject-*supposed*-to-know is that the master did not have to display any knowledge to validate our acceptance of his mastery. That we accept his right to speak as Master without demanding he prove himself *is what constitutes his mastery*. By comparing some specific example, though, problems seem to arise. On the one hand, regarding questions about health/medicine/science, the subject-supposed-to-know would be, perhaps, a medical doctor. This checks out- for the scientist and the doctor do indeed *know* something that you do not. In many cases, when one goes to the doctor, they do not seek to obtain his knowledge; it would be ridiculous even to try- how could we even start? We rely on their knowledge, which is to say we trust that they do know something that I do not. Can anything analogous be drawn up in philosophy?

**Lessons for a Political Theory**

I want to suggest that such a perspective offers a valuable lesson for the political theorist, or for the reader of any political thought (which, broadly speaking, means everyone). The assumption of many Wittgensteinians is that a political or social theory ought to be avoided. That is only the case if we wrongly assume a “theory” is to be a finished product of some definite activity known as theorizing (and/or testing evaluating corroborating). Rather, the therapeutic method emphasizes theory as an on-going, never-ending process of attempting to make sense of persistent conceptual confusions. In that light, the act of theorizing involves the impulse to try and see something in a new way without necessarily having to espouse or defend itself as a report.

In Lacanian terms, one attempting to do political theory ought not try and occupy the position of the discourse of the master, or present one’s self as the subject-supposed-to-know, imparting profound insights or wisdom. However, the more important lesson has little to do with how one goes about presenting a theory but with how one relates to the process of either theorization or relates to political thought in their everyday life. I do not, then, share the view of some Wittgensteinians, that any of his followers ought not to assert anything resembling a theory. The lesson to be learned is not that having or postulating an interpretive theory of the political or social world is necessarily bad; the important point involves paying greater attention to one’s own orientation to what it is they look to a political theory to do. The idea that theorist is making a case to convince you something he knows and has tested to be true. Rather that he is working out something.

That there is some sort of important value in the process of theory as attempting a normative construction, an attempt on the part of a theorist to make sense of something by situating a wide variety of categories together in a way that might allow for a different perspective to come to light. The important point here is on the value of the *process* of theory as opposed to the *product*- the ultimate goal need not be to *have* a predictive theory which turns out to be instrumentally useful in making accurate forecasts of human action in a wide variety of cases. This is only one potential use of the word theory, and it is this sense of the word that applies most closely to scientific theories, whether in the natural sciences or in theoretical physics. The use of the word theory in those cases may not be the most useful nor even the most descriptively accurate use of the word in political theory ought to be used. But that there is some value in constructing one is something I do want to point out. If one can acknowledge that that may sometimes be the case, then one can begin to re-evaluate the way that they themselves approach normative political theories of can different varieties- Rawlsian, Marxian, however you want to describe it. The role of the reader in this case, if one jumps to the conclusion that the theory need be accepted or rejected or to make a judgment about whether or not it is true, or realistic, or instrumentally useful- this already implies something about what you see as the purpose of political theory is and what problems you hope it may resolve. My point is that it may not actually resolve any problems or make the matter any less complicated for you. If the most it does is allow one, for a brief moment, to consider that the world may not be the way that you thought it was, that there are other possibilities that are legitimate, then this itself is enough.

Doing so, though, would imply a shift in thinking about how people think about the world and whether or not theory in any way are determinant over the way one thinks. It is often the case that we attribute a causal relation between one’s acceptance of a theoretical premise and the outcome or effect this has on the thoughts one necessarily can have, the types of utterances one will make. In other words, we might say this person thinks this way because they are a Marxist, a Keynesian, etc.” and that to accept the “theory” means committing one’s self to thinking in this way. Wittgenstein shows us that this need not be the case. At the same time that in order for one to suggest that such a theory is actually a relationship of belief, not a relationship of what we consider to be rational objective truth with no subjective content whatsoever involved. That we do in fact believe in even theories of physics because it makes sense for us too, and that we have no reason to doubt them. But it is the point that one need not look in the realm of political theory for something to believe in nor embrace a nihilism that we therefore believe in nothing.

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