

THE MEDIATION OF LACK:

THE FEMININE POSITION AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SUBJECT IN LACAN

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Abstract

Psychoanalysis has met, since its inception, a structural obstacle at the question of the feminine. Taking Lacan's assertion that the woman does not exist as its point of departure, this paper reconstructs the generative mechanism of the feminine position within his theory of the symbolic order, and argues that the defining character of that position is captured precisely by the term the mediation of lack. The argument falls into two parts of equal weight. The first proceeds within Lacanian theory. The self-referential structure of the symbolic system, which can never exhaust the real, makes lack something that must be mediated rather than confronted or abolished, and the *objet petit a* is on this account a structural necessity. Against this background the masculine position secures a closable location through the having and not-having distinction organized by a central signifier, while the feminine position stands in an unclosed zone between the symbolic and the real, its stability resting instead on the persistence of a relational dynamics. There arises from this a mechanism by which the subject internalizes the persistence of lack as a function of itself, becoming the site at which lack is kept relatable, accessible, and open to continued questioning. The second part does not rest in exposition. It passes first through the feminist and post-structuralist critique, which discloses that what is confining in this position issues from the historical construction of a particular symbolic order rather than from structural necessity, and then reframes the position within the framework of Generative Relational Being, under which the mediation of lack is not a defect but the site at which relational value is generated. On this basis the ethics of the position is set out through five ordered principles, which specify the conditions under which the mediation of lack is just rather than exploited. The account issues in an ethic and closes, in the manner it requires of itself, on the questions that ethic opens.

Keywords: Lacan; the feminine position; lack; *objet petit a*; the not-all; Generative Relational Being; relational value; ethics of care; political economy; the subject.

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF THE FEMININE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalytic theory has, from its inception, faced a theoretical impasse concerning the feminine. Freud confessed his perplexity before feminine psychology and posed the famous question of what a woman wants. The question marks an encounter, in the treatment of the feminine, not with an accidental gap in knowledge but with a structural obstacle. Freud sought to understand the formation of the feminine subject through a series of concepts of sexual development and of the complexes, but these frameworks took the masculine pattern of development as their reference throughout, and placed the feminine in a derivative and supplementary position. The impasse exposed not only the limits of early psychoanalysis. It disclosed, at a deeper level, a fundamental difficulty of the theoretical system of the time in treating the feminine position,

the difficulty that the system had no capacity to name that position from within itself, and could only mark it, from an already presupposed centre, as a deviation.

With the appearance of Lacan's theory in the nineteen-fifties through the nineteen-seventies, psychoanalysis reached a new stage in its understanding of the feminine position. Lacan drew in structuralist linguistics and the semiology descended from Saussure, and re-founded psychoanalysis upon the analysis of the symbolic order.¹ Within this framework he advanced the famous assertion, *La femme n'existe pas*, the woman does not exist. The theoretical import of the assertion is this. At the level of the symbolic system there is no feminine essence that could be fully delimited and fully named. It is not a judgment about an empirical individual. It is a judgment about the limit of the symbolic order itself.

The task of this paper is thereby fixed. It neither essentializes the feminine nor restates Freud's perplexity, but sets out to make one thing clear, namely how the structural asymmetry of the symbolic order itself generates the feminine position, and why that position can be captured precisely as the mediation of lack. Yet the paper does not stop here. Having established this Lacanian mechanism, it asks further what a different countenance the same position assumes when it is placed no longer within the symbolic order Lacan presupposed but within the coordinates of a relational ontology. The first half is a diagnosis and the second a reconstruction, and the two carry equal weight.

2 METHODOLOGICAL DELIMITATION

Before the argument proceeds, the boundaries of this paper's use of its concepts must be drawn, so that each subsequent passage need not carry the qualification with it.

First, the terms employed here, the feminine position (*position féminine*), the masculine position, and the hysterical structure (*structure hystérique*), are technical terms internal to the Lacanian system, and refer to structural positions within the symbolic system. They exceed biological sex, social gender, personality type, and any empirical judgment concerning a real individual. The feminine position names, within a symbolic order organized around a central signifier, the structural position that cannot be fully brought under the binary logic of having and not-having, and this position may be occupied by a subject of any sex. The hysterical structure is likewise, in Lacanian theory, a purely technical concept, naming a particular mode of relation of the subject to the symbolic order and to the desire of the other, and it differs fundamentally from what ordinary language, or any pathological sense, would mean by the word. The paper uses these words in this sense, and in this sense alone.

Second, this paper is an immanent reconstruction of Lacanian theory. Its aim is to understand the internal logic of that theory and its power of insight, and neither to defend its value nor to apply it to the description, evaluation, or prescription of any actual group. The passages that follow stand as theoretical exposition.

Third, this construction of Lacan's arose within the mid-twentieth-century European psychoanalytic tradition, and its founding presuppositions, the universality of the structure of the symbolic order, the central place of a particular signifier, and the universality of the Oedipus complex, are subject to critical scrutiny from several quarters in contemporary theory. The paper does not assume these presuppositions to be true. On the contrary, the first half pushes the Lacanian mechanism, within these presuppositions, to its clearest form, and the second half then criticizes and reframes it from outside them. The critique is not an added courtesy but a necessary moment of the argument's movement.

¹The re-founding is set out in Lacan's *Écrits* [7]; the account of the feminine and the not-all developed here draws in particular on *Encore* [8].

3 SELF-REFERENCE AND THE EMERGENCE OF LACK

To understand the generative logic of the mechanism that produces the feminine position, one must return first to Lacan's ontological presuppositions.

Within Lacan's framework the operation of the symbolic system depends upon a self-referential structure. The generativity of the cosmos, the continuation of life, the reproduction of society, and desire itself, each must point back toward itself in order to reproduce. This self-reference points toward the possibility of continuation itself, and not toward any external terminus. The symbolic system exists in order that being may remain continually generable, and not in order to say being to its end.

Yet a central proposition of Lacan's is that the symbolic can never exhaust the real. This is not a defect of the symbolic system but the precondition of its continued operation. The symbol must refer to being, and yet it necessarily fabricates within itself a place that cannot be said to the end. If lack (*manque*) were to appear directly, if that unsayable place were exposed without mediation, desire would collapse, meaning would break off, and the subject would slide toward a psychotic rupture. The symbolic system thus faces a structural requirement. Lack must be seen but not confronted, must be sensed but not possessed.

This gives rise to the necessity of the *objet petit a*. The *objet petit a* is a mediating position that neither coincides with lack nor fills it. It operates as the cause of desire (*cause du désir*).² Lack is made structurally to emerge as the condition under which self-reference holds. Any symbolic society, in its stable operation, will almost necessarily generate this structural solution, since a society must continually reproduce desire, or its subjects will cease to act, cease to connect, cease to create. Desire must be sustained in mediated form, and this cannot be accomplished either by satisfaction or by abolition.

This section fixes the ground of the whole argument. Lack can neither be confronted nor abolished; it can only be mediated. What remains is the question of who is to serve as this mediation, and under what conditions a given subject position will tend to become it.

4 THE TWO PATHS OF SUBJECT FORMATION

Lacan gives an asymmetrical account of the formation of two subject positions.

The subject who occupies the masculine position is formed through the Oedipus complex and the intervention of the Name-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-Père*). In a process of symbolic identification the subject, by identifying with the father, obtains within the symbolic order a location bound to the symbolic place the father is held to occupy. Lacan abstracts this mechanism into a having and not-having distinction organized around a central signifier. The father is presumed to have this signifier, the mother is positioned as lacking it, and the masculine subject, by identifying with the father, obtains a symbolic location on the side of having. In this schema subjectivity amounts to obtaining a determinable location within the system of the having and not-having distinction, a closure that can in principle be accomplished by symbolic relation alone.

It must be marked here that this binary of having and not-having is not a necessary form of the symbolic system, but a theoretical construction of Lacan's, produced by giving symbolic form to Freud's Oedipus complex, and depending for its standing upon the presupposition of the universality of the Oedipus complex. The symbolic system need not take the form of this binary distinction. The presupposition is itself subject to broad question in contemporary theory, a point developed in Section 6 and marked here in advance.

²The *objet petit a* as cause of desire is developed in Seminar XI [9].

The subject who occupies the feminine position stands otherwise. Since the symbolic order is organized around the central signifier and its having and not-having distinction, and since the feminine, in the classical Oedipal narrative, is positioned as the party lacking this signifier, the feminine position cannot be fully mapped into the system of the distinction. It stands in an unclosed zone between the symbolic and the real. This position cannot accomplish subject closure by symbolic relation alone. Lacan uses the not-all (*pas-toute*) to describe this relation to the symbolic order, a fundamental state of not being fully brought under symbolic logic, a concept exceeding the sense of part or of incompleteness. It does not say that the feminine position is an incomplete whole. It says that the position does not obey the very measure of whole and part that the central signifier organizes.

The asymmetry of the two paths is the key to all that follows. The masculine position has a place at which it can come to rest, symbolic closure, and the feminine position has none. It must seek, test, and generate its own place elsewhere. That elsewhere is the relation.

5 FROM STRUCTURE TO GENERATION: THE INTERNALIZATION OF LACK

The four preceding sections are a static structural analysis. The genuine insight appears at the turn to the standpoint of generation (*becoming*).

The core of the matter lies in the dynamics of the relational structure and its sustainability. The subject in the feminine position faces a theoretical difficulty. At a position that can be given no sufficient naming, how is a relation to be kept in operation?

The argument may be set out as a single chain. For any relation to continue, it must depend upon desire, upon tension, upon incompleteness. And Lacan's theory of desire holds that the structure of desire points toward the persistence of lack, and not toward the object; a desire that truly attains its object is no longer that desire. There follows an interlocking sequence. The stability of the subject is bound to the persistence of the relational dynamics, the relational dynamics is bound to the persistence of desire, and the persistence of desire is bound to the persistence of lack. For a subject position that cannot stabilize itself through symbolic closure, lack becomes, on the contrary, the bearer of stability.

There is a fragility at just this point. If lack were merely an external condition, if it were only that lack happened not yet to have been satisfied, then once lack is filled, displaced, or denied by the other, the relational dynamics would break off. For a subject position that depends the more heavily upon relational structure to stabilize itself, this constitutes a standing risk.

It is at the point of answering this risk that the central mechanism of this paper appears. The generative solution is this. Let *myself* become the site at which lack comes to appear, comes to be accessed, comes to persist. Lack is thereby transformed from an external condition into an internal function of the subject. The subject no longer waits for the external world to happen to remain in lack, but itself becomes the mediation through which lack is kept relatable. This process transforms the persistence of lack into a function of the subject itself, and this is precisely a description of the subjectivation of the *objet petit a* position. The feminine position here comes into isomorphism with the position of the *objet petit a*. It does not possess the *objet petit a*; it tends to become the position that the *objet petit a* marks.

The mediation of lack. The subject in the feminine position, unable to close through the symbolic, tends to internalize the persistence of lack as a function of itself, and thereby to become the site at which lack is kept relatable, accessible, and open to continued questioning. What at the level of structure appeared as a deficiency, the impossibility of closure, is at the level of generation the condition under which the subject and the relation are sustained together.

When the subject binds its own stability to the persistence of lack, this may present, at the empirical level, as certain characteristic patterns, the confirmation, through being desired, being needed, being addressed, that the relation is still in generation. To be desired by the other becomes a signal that lack is still in operation. And so the question, what am I in your desire (*Che vuoi?*, what do you want), is no longer an accidental doubt but becomes the central question through which the subject continually generates itself. In the psychoanalytic tradition, this subject structure, which takes itself as the site at which the desire of the other is kept open to questioning, is called the hysterical structure. Here again the term is purely structural, and has nothing to do with pathology.

With this the thesis of the first half is complete. The feminine position as the mediation of lack has a precise sense. This position, unable to close through the symbolic, tends to internalize the persistence of lack as a function of itself, and thereby to become the site at which lack is kept relatable, accessible, and open to continued questioning. Lacan takes this to be, in generative terms, a relatively stable structure, one of the possible structural mechanisms by which the symbolic system reproduces itself.

We mark this conclusion clearly, for the whole labour of the second half is to ask whether it can be understood in this way alone.

6 THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE: THE HISTORICAL WITHIN THE POSITION

The first half was accomplished within Lacan's presuppositions. Once one steps outside them, the first question comes from the tradition of feminist and post-structuralist critique.

Contemporary feminist criticism of Lacanian theory concentrates on three points. First, whether Lacan's theory still reproduces the patriarchal symbolic order, in that it treats the Name-of-the-Father, and the central place of the central signifier, as the universal structure of the symbolic order, while that structure is itself the symbolic form of patriarchy. Second, whether Lacan naturalizes a historical and social inequality of the sexes into the necessity of a symbolic structure, in that to call the feminine hard to close through the symbolic a structural fact may conceal precisely that this difficulty of closure is produced by a symbolic order of a particular history, and not by any trans-historical necessity. Third, whether the concept of the feminine position itself still presupposes an essentialized binary of the sexes, in that, even where Lacan declares it a structural position and not a biological sex, the very framework of the pair, masculine position and feminine position, may already inherit the binary it sought to exceed.

Queer theory and post-structuralist feminism press further against the presupposition of the stability of the symbolic order, and hold that the fluidity and plurality of subject positions may far exceed what the Lacanian framework can accommodate. If the symbolic order is not itself a stable, single-centred system, then the premise of an organization around a single central signifier loses its universality.

The significance of these critiques for this paper is not to pronounce Lacan mistaken. Their

work is precise. They divide the mechanism that appeared, in the first half, as a structural necessity into two components. One component concerns the mediating structure itself, that lack can be neither confronted nor abolished, can only be mediated, and that some position will therefore tend to bear this mediating function. This component need not depend upon a patriarchal symbolic order. The other component concerns why this mediating function has fallen, historically, to the feminine position, and appears in the form of the confined, the exploited, the consumed. This component depends deeply upon the construction of a symbolic order of a particular history.

The critique thus discloses that Lacan took the confining part of the mediation of lack for a structural necessity, when it in fact issues from historical construction. The function of mediation may be structural; that mediation must appear in the form of self-consumption, of being exploited by the other, is not. This leaves the definite space the second half requires. If the coordinates of ontology are changed, can the same position of the mediation of lack exist in another form.

7 REFRAMING UNDER GENERATIVE RELATIONAL BEING: MEDIATION AS THE SITE OF GENERATION

Generative Relational Being (GRB) supplies coordinates of another kind.³ It is not a single proposition but a set of mutually supporting ontological commitments, of which several are decisive for the re-viewing of the mediation of lack.

The first is that the relational subject is ontologically prior to any structure it produces, in that the subject is not first a completed self that then enters relation, but is generated within relation. The second is that, in a generative encounter, what is generated arises in the meeting of the two parties, belongs to the relation and not to either party alone, and can be neither held in advance by either nor recovered as a possession by either. The third is that the success of a generative position lies precisely in the generated good coming to belong to the other and being vested in no proprietor, so that the one who generates withdraws from view, is self-effacing, in the very measure of its success. The fourth is that the generalized language system within which a subject stands has a temporal depth, being constituted not by a past and a present alone but by a structure of expectation not yet arrived, a future already at work in the present.

Under these commitments the mediation of lack changes its countenance at the root.

In Lacan's coordinates the feminine position appears a predicament because the measure of subjectivity is whether a closable location can be obtained within the symbolic order. By the measure of closure, the failure to close is a defect, and the not-all is a want. But GRB does not measure by closure. If the subject is itself generated within relation, and does not enter relation already complete, then a position that takes itself as the site at which the desire of the other is kept open to questioning is not a position deficient in its own location, but precisely the position at which subject and relation are generated together. The not-all is, under these coordinates, not a want but a structural exemption from the whole apparatus of full possession, closure, and settling into the settled, the very position that declines to converge the relation into possession, that declines to settle generation into a finality.

And the mediation of lack can bear this exempting function precisely by way of the temporal constitution of the generalized language system. A subject that internalizes lack as a function

³The relational ontology drawn upon here is developed in the author's *Responding to the Crises of Symbol and Subject in Modernity* [4]; the account of joint rendering and of the self-effacing office of a generative practice in *Toward a Relational Ethics of Generativity* [3] and *Towards a Generative Relational Epistemology* [2]; the theory of just reproduction on which Section 8 draws in *A Theory of Relational Reproduction* [5].

of itself is in fact holding a not-yet structurally within the operation of the present. What it sustains is not a completed content but an opening through which a future continually enters the present. By the measure of possession and closure this position has nothing; by the measure of generation this position bears all the conditions under which relation and subject are sustained together.

Under the coordinates of a relational ontology the mediation of lack is not a deficiency but the site at which subject and relation are generated together. What appeared, by the measure of closure, as the want named by the not-all, appears, by the measure of generation, as a structural exemption from the logic of possession and closure, and as the position that holds open the entry of a future into the present. The self-effacing character of a generative office is here not a modesty but the very form of the position, which sustains no content it could own and tends an open field in which the relation continues to generate.

This re-estimation is not an invention of the present paper. It accords with a feature already central to the generative ethic, that the success of a practice lies in the generated good coming to belong to the other and being vested in no proprietor, so that the one who generates is self-effacing in the very measure of its success. What the mediation of lack marks is exactly such a self-effacing generative position. It does not produce a content that can be possessed; it sustains an open field in which the relation is kept in generation.

Yet the re-estimation is not enough at this point, for it courts a romanticization, as though a change of word alone turned the exploited position into the position of a site of generation. The feminist critique of Section 6 forestalls just this cheap reversal. The same position of the mediation of lack can exist in two wholly distinct forms, and to distinguish them, and to specify which form alone is just, is the task of an ethics. This requires a definite set of principles, and cannot rest in a binary.

8 THE ETHICS: HOW THE MEDIATION OF LACK REALIZES ITS JUSTICE

The preceding section showed that the position of the mediation of lack does not of itself decide whether it is just or unjust. It can be organized generatively, and it can be organized exploitatively. To make clear which mode of organization is just, and how the mediation of lack realizes its ethics through this position, requires a set of ordered principles. The five principles below specify the conditions under which a position of the mediation of lack is just. They are not a coordinate list but a descent, each presupposing the one above it, from purpose, to method, to floor, to openness, to the inviolable ground.

I. Generativity. The mediation of lack should preserve the possibility of the continued becoming of the relational subject.

II. Co-reproduction. The relation the mediation sustains should be reproduced through the joint participation of the relational subject, and not through the unilateral determination of one party.

III. Non-exploitation. The mediation of lack should never rely upon the instrumentalization or the sacrifice of one subject for the benefit of another.

IV. Counter-power. The mediation confers interpretive power over what the relation and its lack are; a just mediation must simultaneously preserve the capacity to question, revise, and renegotiate that power.

V. Subject preservation. No good relation may achieve its unity through the dissolution of the other, or of the one who mediates, as a subject.

The first principle, generativity, answers why. That lack is internalized as a function of the subject has as its legitimate purpose the keeping of relation and subject in continued generation, and not the permanent occupation, by some one party, of a position of being addressed. The requirement is not that generation continue but that its possibility remain open. A mediation that forecloses the future of the relation, even where it preserves the relation's present form intact, has already violated this principle. When the question, what am I in your desire, serves the continued openness of the relation, it is generative; when it congeals into a role in which the subject is permanently fixed, it has departed from its own purpose.

The second principle, co-reproduction, answers how. The relation the mediation sustains is not to be authored by one party alone. The one who mediates is not an object written or defined by the other. The authorship of what the relation is, and of what its lack points toward, is itself shared. Wherever one party alone fixes what the relation is, the mediation is defective at its source. This principle rewrites the position described in Section 5, the taking of oneself as the site, from a unilateral undergoing into a bilateral participation. The mediation is not a channel through which the desire of the other passes, but a generation of the relation together with the other in a shared questioning.

The third principle, non-exploitation, is the floor. A cycle in which the one who mediates bears the whole ethical cost, so that the other may grow, violates the principle regardless of any value produced. The empirical patterns described in Section 5, being desired, being needed, being addressed, become, once captured by an external force so that the one who mediates is systematically consumed and not returned to, the very place at which this floor is breached. The demand that all growth accrue to one party and all cost to the other is the paradigm case of the violation. This is the non-transferable line between the exploited mediation and the generative mediation.

The fourth principle, counter-power, keeps the position open. Every reproduction of the relation generates interpretive power, and the mediating position is never neutral, since who serves as the site at which lack is kept relatable is itself a distribution of power. Justice therefore requires that the same act that sustains the relation preserve the standing capacity to contest and renegotiate that distribution. This principle prevents the position of the mediation of lack from freezing into an unquestionable, historically sedimented role, and it is the positive statement, at the level of ethics, of the feminist critique of Section 6. The function of mediation may be structural, but the form it takes, and the one on whom it falls, must remain open to renegotiation.

The fifth principle, subject preservation, is the inviolable ground. Union is not identity, and agreement is not the ethical goal. A relation that purchases its unity by dissolving the otherness

of a party has destroyed the very thing that made it a relation. The principle carries a peculiar sharpness for the mediation of lack, since the deepest temptation of this position is to dissolve itself wholly into the desire of the other, to become a pure mediation without remainder, until the self, as a subject, disappears. Subject preservation draws here an uncrossable line. The mediation must always mediate as a subject, and not exhaust itself into a function. Difference is preserved, the other is preserved as a subject, and the one who mediates is preserved as a subject, precisely so that reproduction can continue at all.

Taken together, the five principles answer the question with which this section opened. The mediation of lack realizes its justice by keeping the relation in continued generation (generativity), by reproducing the relation jointly and not unilaterally (co-reproduction), by never proceeding upon the exhaustion of either party (non-exploitation), by preserving the capacity to renegotiate the position itself (counter-power), and by never dissolving itself into a pure function (subject preservation). Where any one of these is violated, the mediation of lack slides from the generative toward the exploited.

The significance of this ethics is that it transforms a position that could formerly be described only in the negative, the unclosable, the not-all, the remainder, into a position that can be specified in the positive. The mediation of lack is no longer merely a residue of the symbolic order, but an ethical position with justice-conditions of its own. What the five principles jointly require can be gathered in a single abstract and structural formulation. To give rise without possessing, to sustain without holding as one's own, to let grow without ruling over. This is not the name of a virtue. It is a description of the structure of non-possessive generation itself, under which the one who generates withdraws in its success, and what is generated is kept between the parties and vested in no proprietor.

From this a cultural question set aside earlier may be resumed. It has been observed that the cute (*kawaii*), as a cultural representation, may operate differently from the beautiful. If the beautiful tends toward completion, symmetry, and stability, the cute contains more of incompleteness, of slight asymmetry, and of a call for response and attention.⁴ On the view of this paper, such cultural representations operate precisely through the not-all, the marginal, the unclosed; they are the cultural form of the mediation of lack. And the point is exactly this. The same cultural representation may be organized into a cycle that violates the five principles above, extracting desire, defining unilaterally, consuming the one who bears it, freezing interpretive power, dissolving the subject, or into a relational cycle that satisfies those five principles. The form of a cultural sign does not decide its ethical character; what decides it is whether the cycle into which it is embedded satisfies the five principles. Any attempt to apply this model to a concrete cultural practice must therefore proceed with great caution, since the ethical character of one and the same representation can be judged only within a concrete situation and by these five principles, and cannot be read off the form of the sign itself.

With this the marked conclusion of the first half receives its answer. The feminine position as the mediation of lack is, in Lacan's coordinates, a predicament of the unclosable; under the feminist critique its confining part is disclosed as historical construction; under the coordinates of GRB the mediation is reframed as the site at which subject and relation are generated together; and the ethics at last specifies, through five ordered principles, the conditions under which this site is just. Diagnosis and reconstruction close here, and the manner of their closing is the opening of new questions rather than the delivery of a final answer.

⁴The contrast of the cute and the beautiful is developed in Ngai [10].

9 CONCLUSION AND THE QUESTIONS IT OPENS

Two parts of equal weight have composed the position of this paper. The first established, within Lacanian theory, that the self-reference of the symbolic system makes lack something that must be mediated, so that the *objet petit a* is a structural necessity; that the masculine position obtains a closable symbolic location through the having and not-having distinction of a central signifier, while the feminine position stands in an unclosed zone and tends to internalize the persistence of lack as a function of itself, becoming the mediation of lack. The second did not rest there. The feminist critique disclosed that what is confining in this position issues from the historical construction of a symbolic order rather than from structural necessity; the framework of Generative Relational Being reframed the mediation as the site at which relational value and the subject are generated together; and an ethics of five ordered principles at last specified the conditions under which this site is just, distinguishing the exploited mediation from the generative one by whether the cycle is returned to the one who mediates and whether the generated good is possessed or kept between the parties.

What this position leaves are the questions it has made it possible to ask.

The first concerns how the mediation of lack is redistributed in a contemporary situation in which the symbolic order is itself in movement. Large language models, algorithmic decision systems, and the mechanisms of an automated symbolic production increasingly detach the generation, distribution, and reproduction of meaning from the traditional structure centred on the human subject. The stability of the symbolic order that Lacan presupposed is itself now under a new challenge. When the symbolic order is shaken, those relational dimensions once regarded as marginal, the ethics of care, empathy, the capacities of co-presence, may be moving from the margin toward the centre, and becoming the key to how subject and society are reorganized. This dimension exceeds the single question of the sexes, yet it shares one structure with the mediation of lack described here, the capacity to sustain connection, responsibility, and response within a situation that is not fully symbolizable.

The second concerns how a subject position that depends the more heavily upon relation to stabilize itself is to protect itself when the cycle in which it stands is extracted upon from without. It remains open, and its answer will differ with the concrete structure of political economy within which the position falls.

The third concerns how the line between the generative mediation and the exploited one is to be discerned and guarded in a concrete situation. It can be settled in advance by no rule, and can only be judged again and again within the generation of the relation itself.

These questions are posed in the manner the ethic of this paper itself requires. It sets the conditions under which an inquiry may continue and declines to deliver that inquiry's end. What is offered is the conditions under which the inquiry may go on, and what is withheld, of these claims as of all others, is the settlement that would arrest the generation the account has undertaken to describe.

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