A Compulsion to Language in Psychoanalysis?

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Abstract

Can Wittgenstein's philosophical method illuminate our understanding of psychoanalysis? This article argues yes, by analyzing Lacan's 'Science and Truth'. Focusing on Lacan's structuralist concept of the subject, shaped by language and desire, the article highlights how a Wittgensteinian lens offers insights for a global assessment of what we do by applying psychoanalytic concepts.

Keywords: language games, psychoanalysis as praxis, physiognomy, surveyable representation, mythology in our language

1.

I would like to start with the elusive word 'compulsion' which, taken only as a dictionary entry, simply reflects a series of abstract definitions. In view of this, I believe it is important to rescue this word in its most regular and concrete contexts of use. Perhaps this way I can alleviate some confusing apprehension of the term and become more precise with what I intend to say in this article. How is this word ordinarily used by people in tangible situations? Let's see if from there we can discern some convenient meaning for our purposes.

2.

A teenager might argue, for example, 'There are no compulsions on

students to attend classes', in response to her parents' complaint about her lack of attendance in math classes. In this sense, compulsion would be an external tension, a social pressure that forces us to do things whether or not we want to. Another example could be a person who can't stop checking her phone, even when she knows it's out of battery. Asked why she always does that, she might explain, 'I feel a great compulsion to see if anyone has contacted me'. In this other sense, compulsion can be viewed as an irresistible impulse, far exceeding the individual's will, to perform an act over which the person has little control or understanding of why it happens – even when it's practically unattainable or perhaps harmful to mental health. Here, it represents a purely mental event. Thus, regardless of whether the compulsive force has an external or an internal origin, the relevant point for us is that, in both instances, the will is overpowered or significantly influenced by an unknown pressure.

3.

But the word 'compulsion' also carries specific weight in psychiatry. Here, it describes behaviors linked to specific diagnoses or used to distinguish between mental disorders. For example, the DSM-5 defines compulsion as 'repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels driven to perform in response to an obsession or according to rules that must be applied rigidly' (American Psychiatric Association 2013: 235). In this context, the idea of 'free will' fades, and the focus shifts to actions performed without clear reason.

4.

Apart from the criterial and classificatory interest of psychiatric practice, the main difference between the ordinary and medical uses of the word seems to be that, in the latter case, there is a concern to avoid an excess of metaphysics, restricting the description's scope to the visible

circumscription of behavior. Psychiatry recognizes mental events, such as, in this case, 'will' or 'feeling', without committing to any explanation of their meanings. Its aim, of course, is not really to explain mental events, but, as they say, to provide 'the best available description of how mental disorders are expressed and can be recognized by trained clinicians' (XII). Understanding 'the best' here solely referring to 'a useful guide to clinical practice' that can be 'applicable in a wide diversity of contexts' (*Ib*.).

5.

This investigation has no interest in categorization; rather, for purely pragmatic reasons, and in alignment just in this regard with psychiatry, it seeks to avoid excessive metaphysical speculation within its descriptions. For a balanced approach, I propose reducing description to the examination of linguistic behaviors within their forms of life. To clarify my strategy, I aim to describe how the words 'language', 'psychoanalysis', 'praxis', 'subject', and 'object *a*' are used specifically within the context of Jacques Lacan's 'Science and Truth' (Lacan 2006)[1]. More precisely, I question whether the ways users apply these concepts align with the theory's stated objectives.

6.

Undeniably, this investigation draws on Wittgensteinian concepts like 'form of life' and 'language game', found in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009: § 23)[2]. A 'language game' isn't necessarily a strict set of rules, but rather a framework of conventions

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[1] Hereafter, ST.

[2] Wittgenstein 2009 will be abbreviated hereinafter as PI, followed by the section number, symbolized by §. Wittgenstein 1969a and 1969b will be respectively abbreviated as BB and OC. PI § 23 offer insights into Wittgenstein's rationale for employing the concepts of "language-game" and "form of life": due to "the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life".

and practices that in general can be expressed by rules and guide meaning within a specific context. These can encompass countless human activities (dancing, praying, speculating about events, formulating and testing hypotheses, calculating, describing, translating, telling jokes, acting in theater, etc.). Wittgenstein referred to the cultural contexts where these games are played as 'forms of life'. Within these cultural niches, games can be practiced, refined and transformed over time through the use of language. These concepts are important for three reasons: first, Wittgenstein's emphasis on language, action, and context aligns with the praxeological needs of psychoanalysis. Second, while his work aimed at therapeutic effects, focusing on helping readers to ethical implications of their own language uses, his philosophy is not dedicated to any form of grand explanation. Finally, both Wittgenstein and Freud emerged from the vibrant Viennese intellectual scene of the early 20th century. While this shared background might offer some insights, their contrasting approaches to language and psychology – Freud's naturalism and Wittgenstein's focus on language's morphology – can probably inspire us to build techniques that are much more harmonious with the psychoanalytic praxis of the 'talking cure'[3].

7.

To the same extent that it is important to clarify the method of analysis adopted in this article, it is also equally important to elucidate whether there is an overconfidence in Wittgenstein's concepts and, consequently, a tendency to confirm preconceived notions. This might be true. Williamson, for example, complained precisely about such

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[3] I cannot dwell on the crucial differences in the conception of language and psychology in the Vienna discussions of the early 20th century within the scope of this article. For more information, see Wittgenstein 1966; Janik 2001; Szasz 1976; and Luft 2003.

attitude when he said:

> But many long-standing misconceptions in philosophy are helped to survive by an unwillingness to look carefully and undogmatically at examples, sometimes protected by a self-righteous image of oneself and one's friends as the only people who do look carefully and undogmatically at examples (some disciples of the later Wittgenstein come to mind). (2007: 8).

So, apart from the three reasons listed in the above section, it must be said that this article may suffer from instances where specific terms are used without careful consideration, as well as a dismissal of alternative visions. If the reader points out such issues, the author is accountable for responding. To improve similar works in the future, it is advisable to balance the use of established philosophical frameworks with a structured openness to other valid perspectives.

8.

Naturally, even though the concepts 'language', 'psychoanalysis', 'praxis', 'subject', and 'object *a*' may appear separately in ST sentences, they form an interconnected set. My focus is on treating this interconnection as the morphology of ST – a physiognomy that reveals its distinctive character. The term 'drawing a physiognomy' refers to creating a comprehensive picture of how words function within the text. This involves analyzing shifts in meaning according to context and how the words are framed within a meaningful whole (cf. PI § 122). My goal is not to provide definitive interpretations, but rather to use the analysis as a starting point, a 'point of comparison' (§§ 130-131), for critically examining how this morphology impacts the clinical practice goals outlined within the text. The fidelity of the designed landscape to

external reality matters less than its utility in this evaluation.

9.

At the end of 1965, the time in which ST was written, Lacan goes from a period of culmination of the convergence with Lévi-Straus' structuralism, towards a new reengagement with Kojève's phenomenological notion of desire, which had been a foundation of his psychoanalytic theory in the mid-1930s (cf. Kojève 1969, Butler 1999). Commonly, these major stages of Lacan's theory are known in secondary literature as the imaginary, symbolic and real registers. Such registers are important markers of Lacanian theory, precisely because they are important poles, or perhaps positions assumed, in the analysand's speech. However, where Lacanian scholars in general see an interdependence among the three registers in the subject's utterances, which seems like a reasonable description, I propose understanding Lacan's last theoretical phase just as a 'reaccommodation'. Perhaps this also marks an important distinction between theorical and praxeological levels.

10.

It is true that the understanding of 'desire as lack' never ceased to be present in any phase of Lacan's thought, but Lacan's focus shifts to a deeper exploration of what he conceptualized, from 1960 onwards, mainly in Seminar VIII, as 'object *a*' (Lacan 2017). Seminar VIII, also influenced in part by Kojève's advice[4], tries to understand transference, which is the fundamental affective connection between patient and analyst, necessary to establish the psychoanalytic clinic, as a relationship of 'desire for an object.' In this context, both the patient is

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[4] Lacan went to meet Kojève, in 1960, to talk about Plato's *Symposium* (cf. Roudinesco 1997: 98–99).

the object of the analyst's desire as well as the latter is the object of the former's in a dynamic interplay. The letter '*a*' is an acronym for *autre*, 'other' in French. Therefore, an 'object of the other's desire' as a counterpart to an 'object that I lack that the other desires'. Therefore, also, a Hegelian understanding of desire as a struggle for recognition mediated by an object of impossible reach. What until then wasn't much more than a formal inscription in Lacanian psychoanalysis's symbolism, now becomes the very focus of a research exploration.

11.

In ST, Lacan's epistemological explorations lead him to adapt his usual theoretical terms to address the scientific status of psychoanalysis. Again, Kojève's influence and the concept of desire feature prominently as Lacan examines Cartesian cognitive relationship between consciousness and its content. Cartesianism is chosen as the ideal representative of modern epistemology, but framed as a Hegelian or dialectical desire between subject and object. This leads to the notion of the 'subject of science' as someone divided between knowledge and truth (ST: 727, 737). Importantly, Lacan posits a structural correlation between this subject of science and the subject of psychoanalysis. While correlated, their approach is reversed:

> This is why it was important to promote firstly, and as a fact to be distinguished from the question of knowing whether psychoanalysis is a science (that is, whether its field is scientific), the fact that its praxis implies no other subject than that of science (733)

The subject of science, shaped by historical and social constraints that outline modern epistemology, becomes the very subject 'upon which psychoanalysis operates' (729). From a praxeological point of

view, the subject of science is a subject of psychoanalysis when the former is in a demand for analysis. This transposition of perspectives highlights the potential for critical self-awareness and exploration of the unconscious forces at play within the modern human being.

12.

In this reversed perspective, science, through its pursuit of knowledge, inadvertently represses truths that the unconscious dynamics in speech inevitably expresses in disguised ways. In other words, the seemingly coherent subject of science emerges as a fundamentally divided subject in psychoanalysis. From one perspective, the subject controls knowledge; in the other, they are prone to repressing inconvenient truths about themselves. This dynamic is possible because, in the analytical setting '… the unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language' (737). Thus, truths that science might suppress through its own business, resurface in the subject's unconscious speech during analysis. The division of the Cartesian subject, its split ontological foundation, is unveiled through analysis as a cover for an insurmountable gap between knowledge and truth (735).

13.

When the modern subject speaks, particularly within the context of psychoanalysis, they become a 'subject of the signifier' (743). For Lacan, a subject conveyed by a signifier in its relationship with another signifier. This revised understanding of language demonstrates Lacan's continued adaptation of Lévi-Straussian structuralism to the new phase of his theoretical development. However, a key new element is the 'object *a*,' representing a perceived 'void' between the subject's signifiers. That is, lapses, detectable in the linguistic structure, within the subject's own speech, can now be demarcated as points of interest

for the unexpected intrusion of the 'object *a*' into the signifying chain. This focus on the 'object *a*' also signals a renewed engagement with Kojève on the theme of desire. Lacan posits that 'truth' is an empty space within language where the subject projects an illusory object, highlighting the function of truth as a driving force from the standpoint of the relationship between (conscious) knowledge and its (unconscious) content, when this relationship is thematized in the speech of the subject of science: 'this theory is necessary to a correct integration of the function – from the standpoint of knowledge and the subject – of truth as cause' (*Ib*.).

14.

To model the praxis of psychoanalysis, ST posits that the subject is driven by a lack, much like how, according to Aristotle, objects in nature have a natural tendency to fill a void. What I want to say is that the idea that nature abhors vacuum, taken as a metaphysical principle of motion, is an age-old analogy, present in Western culture for more than 2,300 years. It is not very difficult to conceive of desire as the movement of a body towards its natural place. The Aristotelian theory of motion may be easily incorporated into the psychological phenomenon almost without realizing that it was only a mechanical analogy. The parallel drawn by Lacan with Aristotle's concept of four causes probably comes from there (743–744) [5] . This stealthy connection makes the notion of 'truth as cause' immediately relevant in such a theoretical framework. However, it's precisely in this vein that

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[5] Clearly, the conception of "desire as lack" comes from Kojève, unlike his direct use of the four Aristotelian causes. However, the dynamics that support his Kojévian conception of desire also predate the two authors by more than two thousand years: "Now, what is the I of Desire – the I of a hungry man, for example – but an *emptiness* greedy for content; an emptiness that wants to be filled by what is full, to be filled by *emptying* this fullness, to put itself -once it is filled - in the place of this fulness, to occupy with *its* fullness the emptiness caused by overcoming the fullness that was not its own?" (Kojève 1969: 38).

Lacan suggests that his 'theory is necessary to a correct integration of the function [...] of truth as cause' (743). It is exactly for this reason that I would like to draw attention to the use of the word 'necessity'. It summons to his theory the same character that wraps any logical system. A deductive operation is valid if, and only if, it is impossible for a true conclusion to follow from false premises. Essentially, 'logical necessity' means that connections and moves cannot be viewed differently within the game. Outside of them, there is no valid move. If a different psychological perspective is in line, it would necessitate establishing a new game entirely, with its own rules, transformations, and goals.

15.

Could we not also add that the concept of 'language', used to understand speech in psychoanalysis, cannot be seen in any other way than on the condition that, in the subject, 'one signifier represents to another signifier'? Probably, yes. So, this set of possibilities and impossibilities gives general guidance to a technique aiming to treat the patient's demand for healing in the best way possible. The best possible way is through a refined technique, and a refined technique is also wrapped in a language game. Therefore, psychoanalytic theory should account for a variety of integrated language games, not really for a hypothetical-deductive natural science like anyone framed in the Cartesian western world, which comprises other, completely different, language games. But now language games related, as Lacan asserts for psychoanalysis, to the same subject of science that eventually appears in the analytical setting in which a suppression of truth is implied.

16.

If Lacan thoroughly understood Canguilhem's 'sensational article'

(730)[6], then he has ample justification for proposing psychoanalysis in the format of a series of integrated 'language games'. The terms that outline the physiognomy of his psychoanalytic technique align well with the practice he intends to serve. An interest that is definitely not the epistemological concern of the subject of science. But the subject of science, who accounts for their epistemological propositions, is the same subject who enters the analytical setting in an entirely different capacity. Here, they present with suffering and express a demand for analysis. Thus, natural science and psychoanalysis constitute a distinct variety of games with divergent goals and contexts.

17.

But should we inherently label desires – the yearning for better financial standing, a closer relationship, or a coveted object – as driven by internal forces like 'lack' or 'libido'? Should we not have to ask ourselves, instead, whether it would not be more appropriate for the objectives of a psychoanalytic clinic to describe them simply by what they express, within their own language games, abstracting from lending them any internal structure that explains desire behavior? The myriad human activities intertwined with language offer a rich tapestry for clinical exploration when analysis remains grounded in the patient's own words. When analyzing the desires expressed in one's own language games, seems to be easier to avoid imposing a theoretical understanding that belongs to the analyst.

18.

Speaking about language games, Wittgenstein clarifies that 'the

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[6] Canguilhem's article offers a devastating critique of any form of scientific pretension in psychology. One by one, Canguilhem dissolves the foundations of a variety of psychology's claims to be a natural science, or a science of subjectivity (physics of the external sense, or science of the internal sense, or science of the intimate sense), or a science of reactions and behavior (cf. 1968).

teaching of language is not explaining, but training' (PI § 5). But 'training' here translates the German *Abrichten*, which is a word 'exclusively used for animals, for training dogs to sit down on the command 'sit', or horses to gallop when the rider performs a certain bodily movement' (Huemer 2006: 207–208). Language games, therefore, are not just 'training'. They are, rather, social coercion massively imposed on individuals, an unrequested burden forced upon someone to characterize belonging to a cultural niche.

> I am using the word 'trained' in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things. It is done by means of example, reward, punishment, and suchlike (BB: 77).

All of this, on the one hand, well describes norms and conventions that distinguish us as social animals, but, on the other hand, causes us to generally see our ordinary activities in just one way. Conditioned and consolidated by habit, an inherited background becomes a kind of mythology against which we may distinguish between true and false:

> The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules (OC § 95).

19.

Unfortunately, 'our grammar is deficient in surveyability' (PI § 122). The comparison of our activities with 'language games' is therefore important not only for highlighting the way in which we are rooted in human communities, but also, from the point of view of the philosophical concern assumed here, for revealing our natural

blindness in relation to what we do while we speak.

20.

Wittgenstein's method of surveyable representation (*Ib*.) aims to give us access to a panoramic view of the connections of our grammar. This method could help us more clearly distinguish how we generally view things we ordinarily act upon. We often act as if our ordinary actions are endowed with the character of necessity. Perhaps, then, this understanding might lead us to change our perception. Alternatively, it could allow us to consciously reinforce our current perspective as we choose to continue.

21.

Rescuing metaphysical terms from the description of psychoanalytic language games could lead to valuable insights. I believe so. Therefore, taking a panoramic view of Lacanian language games through descriptions has significant value. Lacanian terms can easily become clichés in psychoanalytic communities; incorporated stereotypes can then descend into pure obscurantism. At this point, the mythology in our language games, instead of health guiding our activities, may prompt a kind of compulsion. Psychoanalysts become gradually incapable of creating alternative world-pictures, begin to retort or disdain or scorn anyone who thinks differently, and act in a stiff and self-indulgent manner: 'A picture held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably' (PI § 115)[7].

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[7] In Roudinesco's words about Lacan's attitudes in the 1970s we can see a sample of this obscurantism: "his sessions grew appreciably shorter and shorter. He never refused anyone and set no limit to the adoration anyone chose to lavish him. He behaved at one like a willful child and a devoted mother, though this was contrary to his theory; that denounced the omnipotence of the ego in general, though he himself asserted the supremacy of his own" (1997: 387).

22.

In addition to compulsive behavior, an overly rigid understanding of our concepts might subtly transform psychoanalytic concepts, diluting their practical therapeutic value. We see this in works like Badiou (2011), where Lacan is recast as a philosopher competing with Wittgenstein, or Zizek (2014), where he updates Hegel. This parallels Wittgenstein's critique in the *Philosophical Investigations* of mathematicians misusing the concept of π to claim a 'human shortcoming' (PI § 208). In such cases, we risk losing sight of how to apply psychoanalytic concepts within their intended therapeutic practice. For instance, the concept of 'the unconscious' might become an abstract philosophical tool rather than a guide for clinical intervention. This is akin to mathematicians losing sight of calculation in order to legislate on anthropological matters.

23.

The philosophical approach proposed is concentrated on clarifying, not altering, the practice and internal logic of psychoanalytic language games. As Wittgenstein suggests, the goal is to achieve a surveyable understanding of the entanglements within our rules (§ 125). Therefore, philosophy's role should be descriptive, not prescriptive, according to the present proposal. While approaches like those of Deleuze and Derrida offer insights, just to mention those examples, they may at times lead to philosophical overreach [8]. Ultimately, decisions about the direction of psychoanalysis rest with its practitioners. The key philosophical question, with an ethical dimension, is whether our theoretical concepts align with the practice of 'talking

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[8] Such approaches may end up stimulating some sort of legislation on psychoanalysis by philosophy. However, for a more accurate view of the relationship these philosophers maintain with psychoanalysis, see Schwab (2007).

cure'. This, however, can only be answered by those who engage directly with psychoanalytic language games.

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