

Uncertainty in the Time of Coronavirus (LRO 334) : 14<sup>th</sup> February 2022 : François Ansermet

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There follows François Ansermet's references to Lacan's texts, in English translation.

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# LACANIAN REVIEW ONLINE

## Uncertainty in the Time of Coronavirus

Alongside the coronaviruses we see another pandemic appearing, that of a generalised uncertainty which has become a current form of civilisation's discontents. Until now hidden by the hopes generated by science, uncertainty is spreading even faster than the virus itself and is creating a crisis within society. There is the uncertainty regarding new variants, uncertainty as to the measures to implement, or uncertainty about vaccination, including that of children. Has uncertainty become a reason for not vaccinating? Or should one vaccinate children despite this uncertainty? How can one choose? Which way should we place our bet? Uncertainty reveals the extent to which taking a gamble is inescapable.

Whatever the position adopted we fall into a forced choice similar to the impossible alternatives laid out by Lacan: *your money or your life*, which entails the choice of a life robbed of one's money; *your liberty or your life*, which reduces one, like a slave, to a life robbed of freedom; right up to *liberty or death*, which introduces death as the limit on liberty, thus introducing an unavoidable 'lethal factor' into the equation.<sup>[1]</sup> As with that last alternative, beyond the death that the pandemic has spread, uncertainty has become the other death factor which is devastating the world.

One cannot escape the uncertainty. It continues its course alongside all attempts to treat it. Science itself, in its desire to get ahead of uncertainty, produces it, like a real that continuously evades. And what if there were a science of the unpredictable? Like that which Nassim Nicholas Taleb aspires to.<sup>[2]</sup> A science that goes beyond its own distortions, distortions belonging to a tendency which selects only the data that square with its own priorities; as though everything were positioned on a Gaussian curve, in a tenacious desire to retrospectively explain what was unpredictable. How can the improbable be positioned in relation to probability? What is the weight of the improbable? By hiding it behind probabilities, we do not erase its consequences – consequences that repeatedly impact on the steps to be implemented.

Yet, there is not *only* a deathly uncertainty. In truth the aim is to take up the challenge uncertainty presents, without getting drawn into the trap of the death drive. A death drive resulting from life swept towards death. A tendency towards death that is present in life, experienced as an ‘appetite for death’<sup>[3]</sup> which goes towards “...that which in life might prefer death”.<sup>[4]</sup> To go against this tendency is to bet on life and therefore to handle uncertainty from the perspective of life. “The worst is not always certain”, as the subtitle to Paul Claudel’s *The Satin Slipper* points out – in a similar vein Lacan speaks of “blissful uncertainty” that allows for “a sufficiently relaxed existence”.<sup>[5]</sup>

Daring to live in uncertainty, coping with it, not hiding it, being able to make decisions despite it, there lies the wager. Betting on life, without adding to what is placed on the side of death. That is what is at stake if we intend to move from a deathly uncertainty towards an uncertainty on the side of life.

To move away from the unease of uncertainty is also to leave behind the certainties it induces. Is there not, paradoxically, perhaps too much certainty in situations of uncertainty? It is there also that the tendency towards death takes root.

To go towards life requires a wager that there is a way out of the impasse, by finding in the impasse itself the strength to create something new. This would be a way of using the impasse to open new possibilities: a way of confronting the crisis by transforming the deathly uncertainty into a certainty of life, by transforming the unease into opportunity – something that no doubt presupposes inventing something that is unknown.

*Translated by Kirsten Ellerby*

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[1] Lacan, J. (1998) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. J.-A. Miller (ed.), A. Sheridan (trans.). New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 213.

[2] Taleb, N.N. (2007) *The black swan: the impact of the highly improbable*. London: Allen Lane.

[3] Lacan, J. (1938) Le complexe du sevrage. In *Les complexes familiaux*. Paris: Navarin.

[4] Lacan, J. (1992) *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. J.-A. Miller (ed.), D. Porter (trans.), London: Tavistock/Routledge, p. 104.

[5] Lacan, J. (1997) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III The Psychoses, 1955-1956*. J.-A. Miller (ed.), R. Grigg (trans.), New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 74.

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#### Availability of references

[1] p213 of Alan Sheridan's translation of Seminar XI = Seminar XI : 27<sup>th</sup> May 1964. See [Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts: 1963-1964 : beginning 15th January 1964 : Jacques Lacan](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=1145](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=1145)

Quote p212-213 : Your money or your life! If I chose the money, I lose both. If I chose life, I have life without the money, namely, a life deprived of something. I think I have made myself clear.

It is in Hegel that I have found a legitimate justification for the term alienating *vel*. What does Hegel mean by it? To cut a long story short, it concerns the production of the primary alienation, that by which man enters into the way of slavery. Your freedom or your life! If he chooses freedom, he loses both immediately—if he chooses life, he has life deprived of freedom.

There must be something special about this. This something special we shall call the lethal factor. This factor is present in certain divisions shown us by the play of signifiers that we sometimes see at play at the heart of life itself—these are called chromosomes, and it sometimes happens that there is one among them that has a lethal function. We shall find a parallel to this function in a rather peculiar statement, by introducing death itself into one of these fields.

For example, freedom or death! There, because death comes into play, there occurs an effect with a rather different structure. This is because, in both cases, I will have both. Freedom, after all, as you know, is like the celebrated freedom to work, for which the French Revolution, it seems, was fought. It can also be the freedom to die of hunger—in fact, that's what it amounted to throughout the nineteenth century, which is why, since then, certain principles have had to be revised. You chose freedom. Well! You've got freedom to die. Curiously enough, in the conditions in which someone says to you, freedom or death!, the only proof of freedom that you can have in the conditions laid out before you is precisely to choose death, for there, you show that you have freedom of choice.

At this moment, which is also a Hegelian moment, for it is what is called the Terror, this quite different division is intended to make clear for you what is, in this field, the essence of the alienating *vel*, the lethal factor.

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[3] See [Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual: March 1938: Jacques Lacan](#) or [here http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=224](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=224) ['appetite for death' Le complexe du sevrage. = the weaning complex. & is Chapter 1.] See Cormac Gallagher's translation at [www.LacanianIreland.com](http://www.LacanianIreland.com) or [www.Freud2Lacan.com](http://www.Freud2Lacan.com) /lacan p40 of Freud2Lacan.com : p11 of Cormac Gallagher's translation is titled 'The appetite for death' & is in Chapter 1 The Weaning Complex, Section - Weaning : The Specific Prematurity of Birth : quote p21 : The

Appetite for Death : that the tendency is lived by men as the object of an appetite is a reality that analysis discovers at every level of the psyche. It fell to the inventor of psychoanalysis to recognize the irreducible character of this reality, but the explanation he gave it of a death instinct [JE : should probably be drive] startlingly brilliant though it is, is nevertheless self-contradictory; it remains true that genius itself in Freud yielded to a prejudice derived from biology that demanded that every tendency be referred to an instinct. But the tendency to death which specifies the human psyche can be explained in a satisfactory way by the conception that we are developing here, namely, that the complex as a functional unity of the psyche does not arise from biological functions but rather from a congenital insufficiency of these functions.

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[4] p104 of Denis Porter's translation, Seminar VII, See [Seminar VII: The ethics of psychoanalysis: 1959-1960: begins 18<sup>th</sup> November 1959 : Jacques Lacan](#) or [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=386) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=386> Seminar VII : 20<sup>th</sup> January 1960 : Quote p103-104 : With this field that I call the field of *das Ding*, we are projected into some- thing that is far beyond the domain of affectivity, something moving, obscure and without reference points owing to the lack of a sufficient organization of its register, something much more primitive than I have already tried to describe to you in our previous discussion this year. It isn't just the register of the *Wille* in Schopenhauer's sense of the word, insofar as, in opposition to representation, it is the essence of life whose support it is. It is a register where there is both good and bad will, that *volens nolens*, which is the true meaning of the ambivalence one fails to grasp, when one approaches it on the level of love and hate.

It is on the level of good and bad will, indeed of the preference for the bad at the level of negative therapeutic reaction, that Freud at the end of his thinking discovers once again the field of *das Ding*, and points out to us the space beyond the pleasure principle. It is an ethical paradox that the field of *das Ding* is rediscovered at the end, and that Freud suggests there that which in life might prefer death. And it is along this path that he comes closer than anyone else to the problem of evil or, more precisely, to the project of evil as such. This is pointed to in everything that we have seen at the beginning of this year's seminar. Is it to be found in a corner of Freud's work where one might overlook it, might consider it as merely contingent or even outmoded? I believe that everything in Freud's thought proves that that is by no means the case. And in the end Freud refers to this field as that around which the field of the pleasure principle gravitates, in the sense that the field of the pleasure principle is beyond the pleasure principle. Neither pleasure nor the organizing, unifying, erotic instincts of life suffice in any way to make of the living organism, of the necessities and needs of life, the center of psychic development.

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[5] p74 of Russell Grigg's translation of Seminar III : See [Seminar III: The Psychoses: 1955-1956: from 16th November 1955: Jacques Lacan](#) or [here](http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=657) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=657> : Seminar III : 11<sup>th</sup> January 1956 : quote : This is not a world system, but a system of reference for our own experience - this is how it is structured, and we can situate within it the various phenomenal manifestations with which we have to deal. We shall not understand a thing unless we take this structure seriously. Of course, this business of taking things seriously itself goes to the heart of the matter. What characterizes a normal subject is precisely that he never takes seriously certain realities that he recognizes exist. You are surrounded by all sorts of realities about which you are in no doubt, some of which are particularly threatening, but you don't take them fully seriously, for you think, along with Paul Claudel's subtitle, that *the worst is not always certain*, and maintain yourselves in an average, basic - in the sense of relating to the base-state of blissful uncertainty, which makes possible for you a sufficiently relaxed existence. Surely, certainty

is the rarest of things for the normal subject. If he questions himself about this matter, he will be aware that certainty emerges in strict correlation to an action he undertakes.