

LOST IN COGNITION
Psychoanalysis and
the Cognitive Sciences

Éric Laurent

Translated from the French by A. R. Price

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Éric Laurent is a former professor of Psychoanalysis and author of *Le sujet politique*. In 2004, he delivered the "Psychoanalytic Act" to the German Academy of Medicine. He has been invited to deliver the act in Israel, and Latin America, and in English in *Psychoanalytical* and *Psychoanalytic* journals.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

Loss and cognition

This book examines the pretensions of the new paradigm in psychology, a paradigm that has been pushed to the fore as the model for the future of clinical disciplines in the hope of thereby putting paid to psychoanalysis. What is this paradigm shift? It goes by the name of cognitive behaviourism and comes from the United States. Until the 1960s, behavioural psychology had enjoyed a certain prestige in the US. It was later discredited by objections from the linguist Noam Chomsky who held that no learning procedure could ever account for linguistic competence. This competence was surely innate, argued Chomsky, and so he set about hunting out the organ of language. Behaviour would have to be complemented by *a machine for taking cognisance*, an innate machine that conformed to the post-Chomskyan model. It took the discipline some thirty years to deck itself out in new clothes. The advances in biology, in neurology, and in the resulting nebula under the "neuroscience" label, oversaw this change.

Synonymies abound in academic cognitivist neo-speak. They give rise to ambiguity of sufficient scale to support a community. The 1931 publication of Paul Valéry's *Reflections on the World Today* included the 1927 "Notes on the greatness and decadence of Europe", in which we

find a definition of "nation" that, for Valéry, is at once a powerful and indefinable notion.

Yet when men use these indefinable terms among themselves, they understand each other very well. These notions are, then, clear and adequate between man and man, but obscure and almost infinitely conflicting in each man taken by himself. (Valéry, 1951, p. 33)

Only vague symbols can approach this bond, a bond formed in the drive and located beyond clear and distinct concepts.

This same extension is what allows us to speak with one other, and then, when we need greater precision, science makes an appearance. Science too creates a language, but it does not target the social bond.

The essential feature of this neo-speak is that it has the widest possible array of synonymies at its disposal, and they have allowed a conversation to be established between former-Chomskyans, neurologists, biologists, and academics. It gives the impression that they are speaking with each other about something they have in common when they are actually speaking about things that are rather different. This conversation held in the name of science is a pure social bond, a semblance of science.

Cognitivist neo-speak has spread quickly, coinciding with a generational shift amongst psychiatrists and psychologists. It is now looking to become more firmly entrenched. The common ideology, or rather the common hope, of academic psychology today is to try to reduce the subject of psychology to a system of learning. It is both executing and exceeding Piaget's programme of unifying psychology around a behavioural vision of children's learning, whilst giving up on references to logic and language.

It is not just academic psychology that is being recast by the cognitive-behavioural project. From the start, this project opted for the US classification of mental illnesses programme that came to be generalised in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). The two programmes do not overlap entirely, but there is considerable crossover. The cognitive-behavioural perspective is presented as the solution to the difficulties that the DSM met in wanting to reduce psychopathology to elementary data that could be fully observed with no leftovers. The recent publication of the fifth edition of the DSM has

given rise to debates that indicate the cognitive-behavioural project is not the solution. We shall see how in the epilogue to the English-language edition.

The different modalities by which the cognitive-behavioural project has been used, by virtue of the latest findings, are being used to favour the cognitive-behavioural model to favour. Under the name of the reduction of human experience.

In its descriptive accounts of the mind, the cognitive-behavioural project is not only on the cerebral level but also on the cerebral level of magnetic resonance imaging (PET scanning). By virtue of the new psychology of the neurosciences.

Some psychoanalysts have been following the same path that psychology has been following. They place the Freudian unconscious at the centre of models of cognition. Some then try to translate the processes to be translated in the error of the theoreticians of cognitive psychology, both of whom confirm the discoveries of Freud.

Based on the psychoanalytic tradition, the cognitive-behavioural project upholds an opposing thesis: what is at the centre of the analytic experience and the object of the analytic experience.

The unconscious does not fail to be what is *missing from* or *surplus to* what has been learnt during the process of learning that which has not been learnt. It is a mode of thought free from the constraints of what is at once odd and scandalous. It is a fundamental disjunction between what is determined by his learning process and what is determined by the unconscious. The unconscious is cut down to the size of a learning process. It is presumed to be traces entered into the unconscious in such a way that they cannot be

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given rise to debates that indicate an impasse has been reached. The cognitive-behavioural project will emerge from this in altered form. We shall see how in the epilogue that has been added specially for this English-language edition.

The different modalities by which experience is inscribed in the nervous system, by virtue of the latter's "plasticity", have restored the learning model to favour. Under the name of behavioural cognitivism, a new reduction of human experience to learning has emerged.

In its descriptive accounts it leans not only on behaviour observation but also on the cerebral imagery that can be obtained by means of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and position emission tomography (PET scanning). By virtue of the commentary it gives on these images the new psychology claims to hold a legitimate place among the neurosciences.

Some psychoanalysts have been encouraging colleagues to follow the same path that psychology has taken, arguing that there will be a place for the Freudian unconscious processes amongst the diversity of models of cognition. Some think that the time has come for subjective processes to be translated in terms of neuronal networks. This is the error of the theoreticians of cognitivism and the supporters of cognitive psychoanalysis, both of whom think that neuroscience in fact merely confirms the discoveries of Freud and Lacan.

Based on the psychoanalysis of Lacanian orientation this book upholds an opposing thesis: what has been lost in this would-be translation is the unconscious itself. We lose sight of the subject of the analytic experience and the object of psychoanalysis.

The unconscious does not fall into the category of "learning". It is what is *missing from* or *surplus to* any possible learning process. After all that has been learnt during the day, the dream awakens on the basis of that which has not been learnt, uttered, or thought. The unconscious is a mode of thought free from both learning and consciousness, and this is what is at once odd and scandalous about it. We maintain that there is a fundamental disjunction between what would amount to a subject determined by his learning processes (regardless of the more or less sophisticated conception one may have of learning) and a subject determined by the unconscious. The unconscious does not allow itself to be cut down to the size of a learning system, or traces of learning. What are presumed to be traces enter a topological system that is formed in such a way that they cannot be inscribed onto a surface (for instance,

the surface of the neuronal cortex). Only the topology of the letter can account for this. Lacan's topology stands in opposition to any conception of a system of traces inscribed on a surface that could be mapped. It matters little here whether one thinks of synaptic connections in terms of a network (like the GSM model of the global system for mobile communication) or in terms of a constellation of satellites (constituting a Global Positioning System that would one day allow everyone to be located with perfect precision). Both perspectives are at odds with the viewpoint of an unconscious that is understood as the deposit of the equivocations of all possible languages.

Equivocation is one of the names for the impossibility of deducing a subject from the traces of any given experience. This is an impossible relation because the subject always ends up mistakenly connecting himself to other traces.

A subject determined by equivocations implies a break from learning processes. We are constantly running up against the impossibility of getting back to anything that might amount to an originary trace. In other words, we always meet the *Tuchē*, which is not a trace of learning but a missed encounter, as Lacan explains. There is always equivocation with respect to what actually occurred.

Not only is it impossible to get back to the original trace, but also a finite number of learning processes cannot generate an infinite system of equivocations, sentences, languages, and so forth.

Before the neurosciences, one of Lacan's pupils had tried to put forward a model of the unconscious reduced to a system of "learnings"; erotic "learnings" no doubt, but "learnings" all the same. That pupil was Serge Leclaire. He was of the idea that one could form a conception of the unconscious in terms of traces inscribed onto an erogenous body. Combined with one another, these *erotic traces* would ostensibly link up with language. But Leclaire kept running into the same problem: if the system of any given language is infinite, what are the systems that allow us to pass from a system in which there is a finite battery to a system that is infinite? Something does not sit right here. The locus of the subject is required as a Russellian set that articulates the two systems. There is no compatibility between the subject as a Russellian set and the subject of learning. The property of neuronal plasticity, far from authorising any depositing of all possible traces, seals with the mark of impossibility the programme that seeks to reduce experience to its trace.

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Only the topology of the letter can stand in opposition to any conception of a surface that could be mapped. It links of synaptic connections in terms of the global system for mobile communication of satellites (constituting a network that would one day allow everyone to be everywhere). These perspectives are at odds with the way in which the unconscious is understood as the deposit of the traces of experience.

It is for the impossibility of deducing the unconscious from experience. This is an impossibility that always ends up mistakenly connecting

the unconscious with learning. This implies a break from learning that amounts to an originary trace. In Lacan's terms, which is not a trace of learning but a trace of the unconscious. There is always equivocation involved.

Back to the original trace, but also a trace that cannot generate an infinite system of traces, and so forth.

Lacan's pupils had tried to put forward a system of "learnings"; "learnings" all the same. That pupil idea that one could form a conception of the unconscious inscribed onto an erogenous body. The "erotic traces" would ostensibly link the unconscious with learning, but in running into the same problem: the unconscious is infinite, what are the systems of traces in which there is a finite battery to which the unconscious does not sit right here. The locus of the unconscious is a Russellian set that articulates the two between the subject as a Russellian set and the property of neuronal plasticity, far from all possible traces, seals with the unconscious that seeks to reduce experience

What has been lost in the cognitive stance—*lost in cognition*—is the originality of the Freudian unconscious. Precipitated from speech, this unconscious finds its locus in a written form and not in traces. Its locus lies outside the body. It is articulated to the body of living beings, however, by experiences of *jouissance* that remain unforgettable. The three sections that make up this book seek to demonstrate this articulation.

The first section opens by examining the status of the unconscious as exemplified by Joyce's text and how Lacan relates it to Chomsky's conception of the language module. The term "cognitivism" covers very different programmes. Chomsky's cognitivism is one thing, the cognitive therapies are quite another. The two programmes have nothing to do with each other. Lacan's reflection opens a dialogue with Chomsky's programme and opposes it. To think that what languages have in common is that they allow for the emergence of science is quite different from thinking that what they have in common is generative grammar in the form of a language organ. Lacan's reflection strikes me as decisive. The Lacanian perspective consists rather in postulating clearly that what languages have in common is not grammar but the possibility of science. Natural languages convey number, and number is what then allows for the emergence of science.

The second article looks at the impossibility of reducing the subject to traces of learning processes. In particular, we pursue a dialogue with Pierre Magistretti and François Ansermet who offer an original solution to link neuroscience and psychoanalysis. In a book published in 2004,¹ they take on board the accepted notion of "psychical trace", but accentuate plasticity rather than the trace itself. They call into question the notion of the brain reduced to a pure automaton of traces by considering not only inscription in the cortex but also inscription in the body: the somato-psychical bond. Thus, they reject any fixed correspondence between an emotion and a bodily state. We accept their thesis that there is a space for renewed inscriptions of synapses and that in this sense one never uses the same brain twice. On the other hand, it remains the case that there is a radical impossibility of reducing subjective inscription to a system of traces.

The second section broaches a further point of impossibility, which stems from the first: that of evaluation when it seeks to reduce the particularity of the subjective symptom by apportioning it into tick-boxes. The mad machine of the ideology of evaluation is striving to turn

must one use the language of psychiatrists, but also one must rather than by symptoms. This is, as we show in our example

In opposition to this standpoint is the analytic discourse. This discourse, psychoanalysis, in which one encounters a symptom turns out to be untranslatable. The latter is understood as a cognitive error, a category of disorder. The latter category generalises the perceptual error. Lacan was against the symptom from being a perceptual error of the subject's truth. The term "cognitive error" is notably some uniformity to go running to the neuroscience. The thing as psychoanalysis or that which goes out two planes: the plane of the objectivity of psychoanalysis and the objectivity of the object. The objectivity of psychoanalysis and the objectivity of the object are fundamentally heterogeneous. The object constructed by psychoanalysis cannot be demonstrated by science. To go to the symptom, we must examine the subject is produced and the principles of Lacanian analysis. The experience of a real that is specific to the object with the objects produced by psychoanalysis.

Lastly, an epilogue examines the DSM programme and the new initiative to replace it. The cognitive-behavioural model is modified by the newly affirmed observation of behaviour and various programmes that seek to observe behaviour. Its prestige and there is no behaviour modification. The "DSM-5 impasse" examines various players in the clinical

The second article examines the state of cognitivist psychoanalysis, the monster born of this attempt to translate psychoanalytic hypotheses by taking a detour via cognitivism. The mainstream of psychoanalysis in the US today is the former ego psychology current translated into cognitive terms. The ego-psychoanalysts now use the language of neuroscientist and physiologist of memory, Eric Kandel, or of emotional cognitivist Antonio Damasio. They maintain that in order to survive as a scientific discipline, one must use cognitivist jargon; and they apply this policy to both psychology and psychiatry. They assert that not only

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must one use the language of the DSM to maintain a dialogue with
 psychiatrists, but also one must adopt the classification by disorders
 rather than by symptoms. This has led them to renounce psychoanaly-
 sis, as we show in our examples.

In opposition to this standpoint we set out what is most specific to
 the analytic discourse. This discourse situates the specific real of psy-
 choanalysis, in which one encounters the subject of its experience. The
 symptom turns out to be untranslatable in terms of *disorder*, when the
 latter is understood as a cognitive error. The dimension of the particu-
 larity of the subject of the symptom can be contrasted with the homog-
 enising category of disorder (as a cognitive error). For example, the
 latter category generalises the conception of hallucination as an error of
 perception. Lacan was against such an approach and showed that, far
 from being a perceptual error, a hallucination is a manifestation of the
 subject's truth. The term "cognition" has fallen prey to a great deal of
 loose talk, notably some unfortunate synonymies, but there is no cause
 to go running to the neurosciences, making out that they say the same
 thing as psychoanalysis or that they confirm it. We ought rather to sin-
 gle out two planes: the plane of scientific objectivity and the plane of
 the objectality of psychoanalysis. *Scientific objectivity* and *psychoanalytic*
objectality are fundamentally heterogeneous. Indeed, the object *a*, the
 notorious object constructed by Lacan as *Dasein*, the subject's Being,
 cannot be demonstrated by science. Starting off from the object *a* and
 the symptom, we must examine both the effect science has on the way
 the subject is produced and the regime of scientific certainties. The
 principles of Lacanian analytic practice ground interpretation upon the
 experience of a real that is specific to psychoanalysis, and not upon any
 conformity with the objects produced by a scientific discourse.

Lastly, an epilogue examines the consequences of the failure of the
 DSM programme and the new configurations that are being produced
 to replace it. The cognitive-behavioural programme is now being
 modified by the newly affirmed scientific necessity of bypassing the
 observation of behaviour, and we are seeing new clinical research pro-
 grammes that seek to observe biomarkers. The study of behaviour has
 lost its prestige and there is now a general wariness about authoritar-
 ian behaviour modification. The article "The new pathways of loss in
 the DSM-5 impasse" examines how the cards are being re-dealt to the
 various players in the clinical field whose divergent interests are not

about to converge anytime soon in a unifying paradigm. Something new is going to remain “lost in cognition”.

Éric Laurent

Note

1. The English-language translation appeared three years later (Ansermet & Magistretti, 2007).

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