

On its publication in Hebrew translation, Éric Laurent gave this interview : [Interview with Eric Laurent : 20th July 2012 \(Israel\) : by Or Ezrati , published in Haaretz](#) : Information [here](#) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=12047>

Note 1 : Or Ezrati met Laurent during his recent visit to Israel as a guest of the tenth conference of the New Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis, in Tel Aviv. The theme of the conference was “Reading a Symptom.”

Note 2 : Further details of the English edition of ‘Lost in Cognition’ : [Lost in Cognition: Psychoanalysis and the Cognitive Sciences : 2014](#) : [Éric Laurent](#) or [here](#) <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=10584>

Originally published in French : as Lost in cognition- Psychanalyse et sciences cognitives : by Éditions Cécile Defaut : 2008

Note 3 : New Lacanian School – Messenger : <http://www.amp-nls.org/page/gb/49/nls-messenger> . This message does not appear to be still available on-line so is reproduced below.

\*\*\*\*\*

**From:** Dominique Holvoet

**Subject:** [nls-messenger] 500/ Interview with Eric Laurent in Haaretz

**Date:** 25 July 2012 at 22:21:35 BST

**To:** nls-messenger@amp-nls.org

**Reply-To:** nls-messenger@amp-nls.org



## **Interview with Eric Laurent, by Or Ezrati , published in Haaretz on Jul 20, 2012**

**Re-tale therapy: Why there are no short cuts to your problems  
The desire for quick answers has more to do with consumerism than  
with therapy, says Lacanian psychoanalyst, Eric Laurent.**



Eric Laurent: “We have in hand the means of control over us. We are observed from every screen, and that resonates with the feeling that God is watching us.” Photo by Ilya Melnikov

## **Jacques Lacan. Cognitive revolution in psychology.**

French psychoanalyst Eric Laurent is looking for an alternative future for the human psyche. He is extremely perturbed by the mechanistic view proposed by brain researchers and others who reduce the functioning of the mind to a thought process, as proposed by the cognitive psychologists, rather than viewing it as something more basic and automatic. Drawing on psychoanalysis, he launches an assault on the dominant trends in psychology, and along the way also explains something about the way our gadgets see us while we imagine we are observing them.

Dr. Laurent is one of the leading followers of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. He spent 14 years in analysis with Lacan, who died in 1981. A past president of the World Association of Psychoanalysis, which promotes Lacanian doctrine, Laurent teaches in the psychology department of the University of Paris 8. He has also published dozens of articles and books that have been translated into numerous languages. In his book “Lost in Cognition,” recently published in Hebrew by Resling (translated from the French by Nehama Gesser; there is no English-language edition), he discusses what is being lost in the current thrust in psychology toward a scientific approach, both in the realm of therapy and in the overall view of the human psyche.

I met Laurent during his recent visit to Israel as a guest of the tenth conference of the New Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis, in Tel Aviv. The theme of the conference was “Reading a Symptom.”

In “Lost in Cognition” Laurent pits current therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive psychology, which focus on results, against psychoanalytic approaches to therapy that are process-focused. Probably most people who undergo therapy today imagine the final result not as a process of conciliation with the symptom, but rather as involving the complete disappearance of the symptom.

*Is one of the problems of psychoanalytic treatment, and of the psychotherapies it has inspired, that patients do not really understand what is being offered them?*

“I think that understanding what is in the balance reflects the discourse of the period. People who went to see Freud came to a psychiatrist at a time when no one knew what psychiatry was. They wanted relief from suffering and turned to someone who was described as a specialist in this

area – a lone specialist with his own distinctive methods that you learn to trust, in a way that is comparable to [dealing with practitioners of] medicine in ancient times.

“These days, the discourse of the period is that you must be creative, possess means and, above all, get results. The whole analytic position derives precisely from the fact that this is the routine discourse, to which people return, or in which they are immersed – that it is the ideal of the period of time in which they live. But what do they actually want? That is, above and beyond the fact that they note their request, their complaint, in terms of the routine discourse of the period. People say, ‘Please help me get rid of the doubts that are torturing me about my wife: Is she the right person [for me]? Should I choose her or my lover? Is she right? Am I right?’

“On the face of it, they are asking for something very clear: ‘Tell me the right thing to do with my suffering, with the conflicts I cannot resolve. Give me the solution.’ But in the end what is actually being said is, ‘I am the failure in all this, help me get rid of myself.’ If you listen to the way in which people articulate their suffering, their existential difficulties, there is always a tension between the specific aspect, which is limited to what [they] want to be rid of, and the desire for a complete transformation – the desire to be someone else, to live according to the ideals of the time and be liberated from all the contradictions that constitute one’s personal history.

“The clinical skill of the psychoanalyst, in our age and in earlier periods, can be seen in the decision to respond in a precise way to the limited elements contained in the subject’s complaint. Some people are able, through the small window created by their complaint, to gain access to the complex mix created by their personal history, while others cannot. There is no ‘one size fits all.’”

*You write that in some cognitive therapies what is received is fetishism of an ideal figure with whom one tries to identify, in the same way that the advertising industry wants us to identify with the models and products they are selling.*

“One of the demands of our capitalist times is that we are required to think of ourselves as entrepreneurs who have to maximize our life. We need to think more, enjoy more, experience a more intensive sex life. If we do not maximize, we see that as a failure and we are the ones to blame for it. So, the common request will be, ‘Please fix me.’ That is the ideal of the superego: ‘Please fix me, make me super-productive.’ In my view,

it is more correct to see this as a demand of the superego that weighs down the subject and to interpret it accordingly – and not try to accede to it. In the end, everyone can perceive himself as a failure in some sense, and the truth is that that is not so terrible.”

*What about cognitive techniques that have been found to be very effective, such as sensitization – a gradual exposure to the object of fear in the treatment of phobias?*

“I will answer you by taking as an example a patient I had who suffered from fear of flying. There were all kinds of stories in his family about planes and about the ideal of the pilot, so he had a conflict with that and was obliged to confront it. At a certain moment in the therapy he told me that he had to take a plane for business purposes. I encouraged him to go to cognitive-behavioral exposure therapy in which you are exposed to a virtual reality that simulates a plane, [where] an attempt is made to accustom you to this fear-inducing situation. In my view, this is comparable to taking medicine that calms the fear before boarding a plane. The treatment alleviated his condition, but the basic fear remained. He got over the fear, but it took him a longer time before he finally felt comfortable on a plane.

“If someone comes to an analyst for treatment and says, ‘I want to be rid of my fear of flying because I want to get on a plane,’ I tell him, ‘Try exposure therapy.’ If it happens during analysis, I can tell him, ‘Go and do it and then come back.’ Life is difficult. There are some tools that are available to you, so it’s worth using them.”

*What actually gets lost when someone takes his symptoms to a cognitive psychologist?*

“I can tell you where I do not agree with my colleagues from the ethical viewpoint. I am opposed to the behavioral aspect that exists in the usual combination of cognitive-behavioral therapy. The patient is liable to find himself in a confrontation with a powerful authority who tries to impose a behavioral change with a ‘one size fits all’ approach. As though good behavior exists that can be standardized. That is not only harmful to the subject, it is genuinely dangerous to the ideals of freedom. In 1971, at the height of the behaviorist ‘craze,’ Skinner [B.F. Skinner, the father of behaviorism] told Time magazine that freedom is a luxury we can’t afford.

### **Between Lacan and Chomsky**

Laurent opens his book with a lively description of himself in a Lacan

seminar, wrestling mightily with his doctrines. “Beginning from November 1975, we could only estimate the inglorious ignorance that was our lot,” he writes, and continues, “Suddenly, in December 1975, a ray of light appears. Lacan returns from the United States and talks about [Noam] Chomsky. We knew Chomsky’s work ... so we thought we would be able to find something there, a prop.”

*It’s interesting that when Lacan mentions the linguist Noam Chomsky, who was the harbinger of the cognitive revolution in psychology, it seems like you and your friends almost breathe a sigh of relief: Here is something we know.*

Laurent laughs: “Yes, that is true, but Chomsky’s cognitive point of view is very different from the theoretical model that is implicit in cognitive therapy. The simplest way to explain the difference is through the question of whether the human experience can be reduced to learning. Chomsky exemplified this in regard to language by declaring that its infinite complexity could not be explained only in terms of learning. Within the linguistic system Chomsky pointed to an infinite number of sentences that can be created and understood, and whose existence cannot be explained only through a finite system of learning.

“Similarly, the greatest mathematicians say they did not learn mathematics but stumbled upon it, or plunged into it. They learned only the techniques, but the essence of mathematics is not something learned. In their biographies, many mathematicians, when trying to describe ‘how it works,’ make use of terms relating to access to an infinite world of ideas which exists somewhere, external to them. So you have the infinite in linguistics and the infinite in mathematics, and you also have the infinite in the psychoanalytic experience – in the contradiction between the repetitiveness of the pattern of your life and the appearance of a new experience when, through the seemingly infinite process of repetition, something new will be discovered.”

*I would like to use this opportunity to request a formulation for laypersons. Within psychoanalysis, what does it mean when someone says he is a Lacanian psychoanalyst?*

“I will answer very simply. In the 1950s there was a debate in the psychoanalytic movement about the unconscious: Is it made of biological traces? Is it inside us? Is it outside us? Lacan proposed the interpretation that the unconscious is a system that is not inside us, but like language is found outside us. He had a phrase: ‘The unconscious is structured like a language.’ He is not referring to language in the linguistic sense but to the

fact it is out there, outside. We are reacting to a system which is not in our brain, and not through thinking about it but through being subject to its influences on us.”

For Laurent, brain researchers’ quest for the manifestation of the unconscious in cerebral mechanisms, within the body instead of outside it, puts psychoanalysis at risk by adopting a false perspective. This perspective is dependent on a physical reduction, in which the special enchantment of an unconscious that exists outside us – and whose influence is apparent in all our relationships – will be lost.

In the lobby of the Dan Hotel, Laurent, attired in a jacket obeys the instructions of the Haaretz photographer, Ilya, as he aims his camera and mumbles things to himself about the shot. At one point, Ilya apologizes to Laurent: “Sorry I’m talking to myself.” To which Laurent retorts instantly: “We always talk only to ourselves.”

### **Believing in Santa Claus**

Laurent is critical of the popular attempt nowadays to propose a connection between psychoanalysis and the cognitive sciences and brain research. In his book he does not hesitate to attack key figures who are in the forefront of an attempt to bring about integration between the fields, such as the psychoanalyst Peter Fonagy and the American researcher of memory and Nobel laureate Eric Kandel.

Laurent sees two dangers in the attempts to interconnect the fields. One is the reduction of the human subject to a biological organism or a kind of automaton, in Laurent’s words.

The second is the loss of the psychoanalytic doubt about the existence of an external authority, be it science or nature, which experiences the reconstruction of “a belief in Santa Claus, from which psychoanalysis is geared to liberate us.” Nevertheless, when scientific findings can serve the Lacanian approach Laurent does not reject them out of hand.

One discovery by brain researchers that stirred immense interest among psychologists was that of so-called mirror neurons, in the 1990s. These are nerve cells that react in the same way, both when a person performs an action and when he sees someone else performing it. In other words, in terms of cellular activity, the behavior of another person is “mirrored” as though it were the behavior of the observer himself.

*What is your view of the quick adoption by psychologists of mirror neurons as proof of the innate nature of empathy?*

“To begin with, it could act as a critique of empathy as a thought process [rather than as something more innate]. It is not only that I imagine what is going through the head of the other; it is automatic, it is really something in me, which identifies me with the other. I am stuck in the mirror. Lacan said, ‘You think you are watching television, but it is the television that is watching you.’ Your vision is ‘imprisoned’ in the gaze of the television or the mirror. Through that image, you see yourself. We have relations with our double, with the screen that watches us and hypnotizes us. In the wake of the [discovery of] mirror neurons, we would appear to be more chameleon-like than we had imagined. Chameleons are observed by the object and they change color according to what is projected onto them, and in a certain sense we are also like that.”

*Where does that take us, given that we are now carrying screens with us everywhere we go?*

“In a certain sense, we have in hand the means of control over us. We are observed from every screen, and that resonates with the feeling that God is watching us. At the same time, these instruments are marvelous in the sense that they contain our whole life – the pictures, the sounds, our writings – all of this concentrated digitally in one solitary machine. This can offer us a way to live our lives better, but it also brings about judgment of our life at any given moment. The screen observes us and seems to ask, ‘Did you do the right thing to maximize your life today? Were your performances as good as those of your MacBook?’

“That is the fear. As soon as I have bought my ultimate MacBook, I know that in California, Apple is already preparing the next generation. When I buy my iPhone 4S it is already obsolete because there will be an iPhone 5, which I will have to buy if I want to preserve my capability. In this way the technical aspect [of these devices] can be simultaneously exciting, and develop and expand life, but also be a sign of death.

“Like the phenomenon we see in certain countries in which adolescents lock themselves in their room and insulate themselves from communication with the world other than [that of] the computer. That can be a way to make themselves global but also a way to close themselves off from the world.”

### **Initial euphoria**

In the Tel Aviv University conference you spoke about the new path being embarked on by the neurosciences. Given the awareness that it is



not really possible to create a model of the mind, do you think that a shift is under way toward an occupation with prosthetics, such as a robotic arm or an artificial eye, that are connected to and controlled by the brain?

“Yes. When I talk to brain researchers I take note that a change has occurred. There is a shift from questions about the basic issues – from an attempt to create a comprehensive model for the functioning of the brain, to applied research, in an attempt to build, in the shortest possible time, prosthetics that will be able to help people with disabilities.”

*Do you see this as a change, in which science leaves room for the unconscious?*

“Yes, to a certain degree. After the initial euphoria, in which it was thought that a great deal could be achieved in a short time, it now seems that the brain sciences have left aside the idea of a functioning model of the mind. The mainstream today is focused on applied tools for practical use.”

### **Capitalism’s ‘new psychology’**

On the day of my conversation with Eric Laurent, Haaretz Magazine published Prof. Eva Illouz’s article, “A properly managed mind” (June 15). Laurent quotes from the article: “Why does neoliberalism work so well as an ideological system? Because it fits like a glove the worldview dominating so many Western countries and promoted by popular psychology: that we are responsible for our failures.”

Putting the newspaper aside, he says, “I would say the opposite: that it is capitalism which created for itself a new psychology to meet its needs. This is part of the whole health bureaucracy and of the way in which medicine is built into the new power structures which control developed countries. The whole medical system has become a way to wield power and catalog populations, to place them in a new order which is directly impacted by science. Eva Illouz mentions both the statistic of the number of psychologists in the United States and the statistic of the ‘health business,’ which she regards as two very distinct entities. Psychology, and even less psychoanalysis, is only a very small part of what medicine has become.”

In Laurent’s personal experience, psychoanalysis actually encourages social revolutionism. In connection with the analysis he underwent with Jacques Lacan, he related in the past that Dr. Lacan did not allow him to miss even one session of analysis, but also not one of the demonstrations

being held at that time: This was the period of the student demonstrations in 1960s' Paris. For Laurent, one of the things that sets psychoanalysis apart and differentiates it from approaches of cognitive psychology is its attitude toward moral and ethical aspects of human existence.

“Freud never ignored the fact that beyond the matter of alleviating suffering there are also questions of ethics and morality,” he says. “How to live a life that is consistent with morality – ‘to work and to love,’ as he said – while at the same time to reject the false ideas of contemporary morality.”<sup>[1]</sup>