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From Cogito to Covid

Rethinking Lacan's "Science and Truth"

Edited by

MOLLY A WALLACE

CONCETTA PRINCIPE



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Contents

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| | <i>Molly A. Wallace and Concetta V. Principe</i> | |
| 2 | Formal Truth and the Unconscious | 19 |
| | <i>Paul M. Livingston</i> | |
| 3 | Post-Truth-as-Cause: Remarks on the Division of the Subject in the Era of Post-Truth Politics | 45 |
| | <i>Hernán Noguera Hevia</i> | |
| 4 | Sci-Fi and Truth: Saturated Subjects in the Films of Claire Denis and Jordan Peele | 71 |
| | <i>Nicholas Devlin</i> | |
| 5 | The Truth of Lacan’s Name of the Father: A Reconsideration of the “Truth” in “Science and Truth” | 91 |
| | <i>Concetta V. Principe</i> | |
| 6 | Mogged by the Market: Science, Subjectivity, and the Rationalization of Sex | 113 |
| | <i>Calum Lister Matheson</i> | |

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 7 Capital with Science: COVID-19 as a Case of Successful Paranoia? | 137 |
| <i>Fabio Vighi</i> | |
| Index | 161 |

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1

Introduction

Molly A. Wallace and Concetta V. Principe

In a 1994 article on science and psychoanalysis, Marc Strauss gives an account of his first encounter with Jacques Lacan. Standing in front of the Panthéon in Paris, Lacan reportedly shouted, “Psychoanalysis is to be taken seriously. It is to be taken seriously because it is not a science. It is not a science because it is irrefutable” (Strauss 1994).¹ Pithy yet enigmatic declarations aside, Lacan’s attitudes toward science were hardly this straightforward throughout his career. His reliance on mathemes and formulae alone should give most readers pause before labeling Lacan an anti-science thinker. Nonetheless, he went to great pains to distinguish psychoanalytic practice from the scientific practice of many of his

¹ *La psychanalyse est à prendre au sérieux. Elle est à prendre au sérieux parce qu'elle n'est pas une science. Elle n'est pas une science parce qu'elle est irréfutable.* (translation mine)

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contemporaries. If scientists like Alan Sokal called Lacan a charlatan, he called them “overgrown children” (Lacan 2015, p. 19).

Perhaps no text or lecture of Lacan’s spends as much time on the distinction between science and psychoanalysis as “Science and Truth,” which was presented at the opening lecture, in December 1965, of *Seminar XIII: The Object of Psychoanalysis* (1965–1966) and later published in the first volume of the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*. Two years prior, Lacan was famously ousted from the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA) and shortly thereafter forced—at the behest of the IPA—to split from the Société Française de Psychanalyse (SFP). These events prompted him to found his own school, École Freudienne de Paris (EFP), which moved its practice (at Louis Althusser’s invitation) to the École Normale Supérieure (ENS). For the first time, Lacan’s audience consisted not only of clinicians and analysts but also of people from across the intellectual and political spectrum. Although close analyses of Freud’s texts still figured prominently in his seminars, Lacan’s separation from the clinic saw him engage with disciplines outside of the clinic far more frequently than before. Perhaps because he found himself no longer adhering as closely to Freud (who considered psychoanalysis a science), Lacan felt it necessary to situate psychoanalysis and science with respect to each other. Of course, when we look back on Lacan’s effort in “Science and Truth” decades later, it seems all the more fraught considering the determined opposition from all sides to the notion of a psychoanalytic science, both by his defenders and by those who have condemned him as a fraud.²

For readers versed in Lacan, the first few pages of “Science and Truth” feature familiar themes. The essay begins with the *cogito*, depicting Descartes’ strategic doubt and subsequent God-given assurance as the formative maneuvers of the modern subject, which Lacan calls the “subject of science.” However, in a disorienting maneuver later in the text, he says that science is marked by foreclosure, essentially equating it to psychosis. “Science and Truth,” even to those who are sympathetic to Lacan, has proved a puzzling text, the upshot of which is that there is still

² Among the latter is even a former follower who wrote a positive “introduction” to “Science and Truth.” See Dylan Evans’ 2016 article “Science and Truth: An Introduction I” in *The Symptom* 10.

much more within it to decipher. This collection of essays returns to Lacan's essay 50 years after its publication and almost 400 years after Descartes established the *cogito*.

It is difficult to know where to start to get a perspective on what has changed since 1965, but the essays gathered here offer some examples: the logical self-contradiction residing within empirical science itself; "post-truthism" and political nihilism; the interweaving of science and its representation in films; the increasing awareness of Christian successionist ideology; the startling appearance of the "incel" movement; and, finally, the self-contradictions emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have served as the backdrop to every essay herein. At the time of writing this introduction, the world is still suffering a pandemic that produces new, highly contagious variants at the same rate as it produces new, similarly contagious theories about it (conspiratorial and otherwise). The pandemic manifests a principle theme of this introduction: that we are in an era marked simultaneously by extreme polarity and extreme interconnectedness. In the decades since "Science and Truth" was composed, modern technologies have become a strange new beast with which we are increasingly interwoven, a beast that is both within us and outside of us. This uncanny topology, as Lacan might call it, complicates any attempt to define the modern individual, the subject of science, who remains enigmatic despite our many attempts to clarify what it means in "Science and Truth."

At the same time, empiricism remains the dominant form of reasoning in many, if not most, scientific fields. It is this empirical science that Lacan seems to mean when he describes a science that can produce seemingly endless knowledge on the assured grounds that what it sees is what it gets. In "Science and Truth," he accuses science of being caught up in the "deadlocked endeavor to suture the subject." Insofar as it cannot "succeed," it continues to produce knowledge to cover over the truth of the subject's consisting in a division between knowledge and truth. In its attempts to suture the subject, science must call upon some self-evident authority (God for Descartes), which Lacan calls the master signifier, to guarantee the consistency of the knowledge that it must continuously generate.

Lacan insists that this paradoxical modern dialectic is the dialectic of a Möbius strip, whose twist is the site of the subject as a simultaneity of division and foreclosure. What seems to trouble this topology—which we can all too easily imagine in 3D space as a strip that has been cut, twisted once, and glued back together—is that science must somewhere have a sense of this deadlocked division or divided deadlock. Otherwise, why the drive to keep producing knowledge? This peripheral awareness is implied in Lacan’s own characterization of the relationship: “science *does-not-want-to-know-anything* about the truth as cause” (2006, p. 742; emphasis added). What Lacan might have been sensing when he equated science and foreclosure was not that science in 1965 was strictly equivalent to, say, the extraordinary psychosis of Schreber. Instead, Lacan saw that the Möbius was converging toward, perhaps even collapsing into, something like Jacques-Alain Miller’s “ordinary psychosis”: a kind of untriggered, semi-psychotic steady state, the culmination of what many Lacanians have described as a modern era of perversion structured by the Möbius strip.³ But this psychopathologizing of science remains speculative and enigmatic, and it serves as one of the common themes in the following chapters. It is a fruitful avenue for exploration, since it allows us to question the trajectory of both science and the subject of science. It is in tracing this trajectory that Lacan’s essay still serves as a powerful guide to both where we have been and where we might end up.

Science and the Möbius

About a decade after “Science and Truth,” in his November 1977 session of *Seminar XXV*, Lacan echoed his statement in front of the Panthéon: “It [psychoanalysis] is even not a science in any way. Because the problem, as someone called Karl Popper has superabundantly shown, is that it is not a science because it is irrefutable” (Lacan 1977–1978, p. 1). The

³Many have described capitalism as perverse, the most well-known being Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *The Ticklish Subject* (1997). Jacques-Alain Miller, on the other hand, seemed to have moved from something like this view to his idea of an “ordinary psychosis.” For an overview of ordinary psychosis, see No. 19 of *Psychoanalytic Notebooks* 2009, especially Jacques-Alain Miller’s “Ordinary Psychosis Revisited.”

philosopher of science Karl Popper famously posited that all scientific knowledge is refutable and, hence, provisional, and he puts its refutability in stark contrast to the psychoanalytic practice. Lacan himself admitted that psychoanalysis “will last as long as it will last, it is a practice of chit-chat (*bavardage*)” (1977–1978, p. 1). This confession would seem to close the case on psychoanalysis having any claim to be a science; however, although falsifiability is certainly a common operating principle in scientific experimentation, it is by no means the only criterion for verifying results. In fact, contemporary science increasingly relies on fluid models rather than falsifiable theories.⁴

Of course, a form of falsifiability comes back into play whenever data is so discordant with a model that it necessitates a new one. This is the logic behind Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a “paradigm shift.” According to this theory, science operates in a state of “normalcy” until sufficiently disruptive discoveries arise to overcome that state of normalcy, necessitating a radical shift to a new paradigm. In July 1965, shortly before Lacan delivered “Science and Truth,” Popper and Kuhn pitted their theories against each other in a debate that would echo throughout scientific discourse for decades. Interestingly, the two men had not been concerned with one another enough to engage before (or after) the debate. Noting this mutual indifference, sociologist Steve Fuller asks, “why do most courses in scientific method today—regardless of specific disciplinary origin—continue to reserve a place for ‘Kuhn vs. Popper?’” (2003, p. 10). Indeed, the two men have frequently represented the poles of scientific method, and this is regardless of whether certain disciplines or scientists claim to follow a strictly Popperian or strictly Kuhnian method (as far as I know, they do not). The reason lies in how the intricacies and subtleties of their theories have been ignored. “In terms of scholastic affiliations, Popper is portrayed as objectivist, realist and positivist, while Kuhn appears as subjectivist, relativist and historicist” (Fuller 2003, p. 10). Of

⁴A 2014 article in *Scientific American* describes the shift from the language of disprovable “theories” to that of “models” that can be modified to accommodate new data. Since a science of models is obviously a science closer to Lacan’s attempts to find models of the subject of science, Lacan’s reference to Popper may not have been a simple admission of defeat. Jogalekar, Ashutosh. 2014. Falsification and its Discontents. *Scientific American*. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/the-curious-wavefunction/falsification-and-its-discontents>. Accessed 15 January 2022.

course, neither Popper nor Kuhn would have identified wholly as a positivist or relativist, nor as an empiricist or rationalist, but nonetheless, much of modern thought has oscillated between these poles. As Gaston Bachelard realized, however, this oscillation is a tense one: “If one could translate into philosophical terms the double movement which at present animates scientific thought one would perceive that there has to be alternation between a priori and a posteriori, that empiricism and rationalism in scientific thought are bound together by a strange bond, as strong as the bond which joins pleasure and pain” (1968, p. 6).⁵

Lacan’s “Science and Truth” was not only roughly contemporary with the Popper-Kuhn debate, but also had its own pair of incompatible, yet irreversibly connected, scientific coordinates: knowledge and truth. This is the oscillating science of the Möbius, whose two sides—knowledge and truth—are sutured by a troubled fantasy that is both subjective and logical. It is, in part, the troubled fantasy of origin and linear development, which Lacan repeatedly rejects: “This [Möbius] strip conveys the fact that the division in which these two terms come together is not to be derived from a difference in origin” (2006, p. 727). Psychoanalysis is thus guided neither by falsifiable theory nor by an original empirical ground, or, in Lacan’s terms, by the purely symbolic nor the purely imaginary. What, then, is driving it? What could guide it?

In “Science and Truth,” Lacan says that “in science, as opposed to magic and religion, knowledge is communicated.” Science, which is caught up in the “deadlocked endeavor to suture the subject,” is not deadlocked in the sense of a dead-end but rather as a never-ending process. The suture, which was first introduced in *Seminar XI* and brought into prominence by Jacques-Alain Miller, would remain a central theme throughout the ten sessions of the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, and no single understanding of the term would arise from these debates.⁶ Nonetheless,

⁵ I must credit Nathan Brown’s *Rationalist Empiricism: A Theory of Speculative Critique* (2021) for drawing my attention to this passage from Bachelard.

⁶ That is not to say the camps that arose out of these debates were not formative. The trajectory of both Miller and Badiou would largely be set during these sessions. See *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* Volume 1 (1966): Miller, “La suture (Éléments de la logique du signifiant)” and Leclaire, “L’analyste à sa place?”; Volume 3 (1966): Green, “L’objet (a) de Jacques Lacan, sa logique et la théorie freudienne,” Audouard, “Le simulacre,” and Milner, “Le point du signifiant”; Volume 9 (1968):

a few things can confidently be said about its use in “Science and Truth.” The suture is, as the word implies, never a complete closure of a gap. It is instead a convoluted movement between inside and outside—a movement that science does not want to know about.

In a discussion of the child’s missing object of desire (specifically the mother’s breast), Michael Plastow notes that Freud draws on Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics* for his theory of retroactivity. Specifically, he uses the term *proton-pseudos* (πρωτον ψευδος), which refers to Aristotle’s proposal that “a false argument comes about by reason of the first falsity in it” (*APr.* ii.18 66a16). Plastow continues, “Here we have a first lie, or, we could say, Freud’s original invention of a mythical fully satisfying first encounter, which is necessary to found the means of structuring the inherently unsatisfying relation to the object” (2018, p. 15). This first lie becomes the child’s “pre-history,” which ascribes “a certain form, a particular shape, to the structure of desire for the child” (2018, p. 20). (Freud would also describe this “unsatisfying relation” in the fantasy known as “a child is being beaten.”)⁷ Descartes’ final appeal to God as guarantor follows this familiar logic of fantasy: “Descartes’ approach is, singularly, one of safeguarding the *ego* from the deceitful God, and thereby safeguarding the *ego*’s partner—going so far as to endow the latter with the exorbitant privilege of guaranteeing the eternal truths only insofar as he is their creator” (Lacan 2006, p. 735). Is this the first suturing “event” that explains why modern secular science “does-not-want-to-know-anything about the truth-as-cause” since acknowledging the “truth-as-cause” would bring science (and the subject of science) back to its dependence on a God or perhaps a God-father?

Regnault, “Dialectique d’épistémologies” and Miller, “Action de la structure”; and Volume 10 (1969): Badiou, “Marque et manque: à propos du zéro.”

⁷ See Sigmund Freud. 1999. A Child is Being Beaten. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 2., trans. James Strachey & Alix Strachey, 179–181, Vintage.

Convergence and Segregation

In contrast to a science that sutures, a Lacanian psychoanalysis aims at precisely this truth-as-cause, necessarily beginning with a cutting of the Möbius strip's imaginary assurances. The contributors to this volume return to this necessity (as Lacan did up to the very end of his life, repeating that there is no sexual relation and no immediate continuity between the two sides of the Möbius strip). In the era of “post-truth” (and, for some, “post-Lacan”), it is becoming increasingly urgent to go back to this first step before we become too disoriented, perhaps even paralyzed, by the loss of our traditional coordinates.

What others have described as the increasing self-reflexivity of postmodernity, we refer to here as “convergence,” the latter perhaps having a sense of a trajectory, of something that is coming to be. As Lacan put it, we are “headed for a blowout” (1972, p. 11). There is by now a large literature warning of a coming catastrophe, along with an equally large literature eagerly anticipating a bright new age. Among the latter is Robert B. Laughlin's 2005 book *A Different Universe: Reinventing Physics from the Bottom Down*:

Much as I dislike the idea of ages, I think a good case can be made that science has now moved from an Age of Reductionism to an Age of Emergence, a time when the search for ultimate causes of things shifts from the behavior of parts to the behavior of the collective. ... This is why, for example, electrical engineering students are often no longer required to learn the laws of electricity—which are very elegant and enlightening but irrelevant to programming computers. It is why stem cells are in the news but enzymatic functionalities are confined to the fine print on boxes of soap. It is why movies about Marie Curie and Lord Rutherford are out while Jurassic Park and Twister are in. The protagonists in these newer movies are not concerned with microscopic causes but with capricious organizational phenomena—as in, “Arrrggghhh! It's coming right for us!” (2005, pp. 343–344)

Laughlin believes that recent science has shown that laws established at microscopic levels do not reliably predict more complex, collective