

Controversies over the Mental*

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Translated by Jack W. Stone

To borrow a term from David Lodge's novel *Thinks . . .*,¹ must psychoanalysis necessarily re-enter today the "Mind/Body Shop"? A shop everyone sings the praises of in the name of the inescapable and imperialist character of the cognitive sciences.

On Sciences that go Hand-in-Hand with Consciousness

The cognitive sciences became conscious of themselves more than twenty years ago. They were born of a regrouping of the domains of knowledge [*savoir*] already in part constituted by cybernetics in the fifties. In effect, cybernetics prepared the ground for the arrival of the "brain" as a new frontier for man in the last decade of the 20th century. The mission of cybernetics was to found a science of communication, information, and government that might allow a new and ideal society in order to avoid the return of the horror of the Second World War. Among the major effects of the cybernetic enterprise, one might count structuralism, sometimes post-structuralism, and also certain aspects of the first Lacan who in 1955 entitled his lecture "Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics."² As lateral effects of this enterprise, we find, a little later, the systemic theory of Gregory Bateson, the general theory of systems, and, by way of this, part of the inspiration for the Deleuzianism that ended up highlighting the "cyber" and the notion of the post-human. Claude Lévi-Strauss could thus hope and pray, fifty years ago, for a theory of communication regrouping structural anthropology, economics, and linguistics. Cybernetics and structuralism aimed for a redefinition of the human that would put aside the question of consciousness and of the subject and would therefore oppose itself to classic thought, to phenomenology as well as to psychology, to hermeneutics and to the theory of *connaissance* [knowledge].³

33

However, it is indeed as a theory of *connaissance* and of the conscious mind that the cognitive sciences emerge at the end of the seventies as a reaction to the structural perspective and by moving away from cybernetic humanism. Language as structure is reduced, then, to common sense. Noam Chomsky's grammatical and syntactic turn translates in practice what one might call a substitution of cognitive structures, fixed in the brain, for the linguistic structures of Saussurian inspiration. A very simple definition, then, poses these cognitive sciences as the interdisciplinary study of the acquisition and utilization of *connaissance*. The interdisciplinarity between the philosophy of the mind, which is its epistemology, psychology, computer science, and the neurosciences is part of their definition. This interdisciplinarity implies a compatibility of *savoirs* in the name of a *connaissance* supposed common [to all these forms of knowledge] which is what the term cognitive expresses.

Connaissance or *Savoir*

We could already refuse to enter the above-mentioned shop in the name of the fact that, if there is *savoir*, there is no *connaissance*. The only "*connaissance* is from illusion or myth," as Lacan puts it in "*Radiophonie*."⁴ Is it not, precisely, the explosion of *savoir*, particularly that of

science, that could have justified the cognitivist project? This project appears as a defense of *connaissance* in the face of *savoir*; a *connaissance* that would give new life to theories harmed by structuralism, in particular phenomenology and psychology. Thus, the cybernetic project, which wanted to re-found the human on communication, would give birth to a new master signifier: the "brain-that-knows" ["*cerveau-qui-connaît*"], to which all the signs would signal and which thinks in secret, or which secretes thoughts as other organs secrete humors.

The Mystery of the Mental

The philosophy of the mind, which vies at the present time for first place among the cognitive sciences, poses to neurosciences a very simple question on the secret of thought: does a mental state exist? To which a second question is added: how can this mental state determine an effect in the body and on the

34

world, which is to say, cause a physical state? Why is it that my arm raises itself if I decide to raise it? Descartes had been the first to think that such a mental state exists linked to thinking. For Spinoza, nothing prohibited supposing such a state for all that exists in nature. Hobbes, for one, denied the possibility that mental states exist that would not be physical. What, then, becomes a problem is the freedom of the mental to escape physical determinism.

Behaviorism situates itself precisely as a refusal to consider the mental state. There is no mental state, only physically observable behaviors. To which cognitivism objects that this hypothesis does not allow us to resolve the question of language, of belief, even of the intentionality inherent in our acts. One forgets that cognitivism is the most constant enemy of behaviorism. Speaking of cognitivo-behaviorism is therefore a genetic aberration for rigorous cognitivists.

What has been taken from behaviorism today is a hypothesis proposed as a truth of "nature": the supposition of an identity between the mental state and the cerebral state. I *think* because my "C fiber" is activated, I can objectify it by the cerebral imagery that has become the new Galilean telescope of neuroscience. Lacan, himself, could see in the fold on the forehead of a hedgehog the only proof of thought! We have the same thing today with a decidedly more costly apparatus. But, as a philosopher suspicious of the empiricism of these notions remarks, if a Martian shares the same mental state as I, if he considers the water delicious when he drinks liquid nitrogen through his silicon lips, does this mean that his mental does not exist, since it responds to a different physical reality? It is the same, no doubt, with angels, which interested Lacan, since they have no body but a mentality translated by their "stupidity" ["*bêtise*"]. Hence there has to be something other than a co-occurrence of the phenomena of the mind and the body; there have to be some types of relations or a law binding the mental and the physical. Certain people think that this is a false problem and that mental states are functional. What allows us to think of artificial intelligence as possible is the hypothesis of the brain conceived as a biological computer. Its elements correspond, then, to a modular functioning, analogous to that of

35

the machine. But it is a question of a logical machine in which the neurosciences and the calculation of the cerebral place are futile, even useless. As is underscored, for example, by Jerry

Fodor, it is useless to know where the carburetor is, it suffices to know how it works. If the mental arises from the functional, is it, then, reduced to a non-linguistic syntax and logic made up of modules and constituting a metalanguage such that you never hear: "mentalese"?

The tendency to conceive of the brain as a computer can drift over a hierarchical conception of its functions that ignores that the *software* [in English] is linked more to our culture than to nature. The tendency of this type of cognitivism is to attribute to the brain what some think to be the attributes of a board of directors. The Ego, a very classical one, is then supposed to direct its little neuronal world through consciousness. Others like Antonio Damasio pose inversely that this board of directors is no more than the hostage of the body, a major stockholder that knows how to impose its views on the mental.

The Bio Mental

But the mental does not think in as rational a fashion as does a logician, even a computer, for then one forgets its biological foundation. For others, it is, therefore, not the "mentalese," the logical metalanguage, that dominates, but the network, the atopic connection of neurons determined by the interactions of the body and of the natural and social environment, even of language. The mental is not original [*d'origine*] for it emerges in a contingent fashion from the population of neurons itself determined by interactions incarnated by the magic of the synapse. The mind is therefore not in the head, it flows from an emergent and collective process of exchanges and interactions. The properties that can thus emerge necessitate no natural consistency, nor the hypothesis of a central system. "Too bad for the master-signifier, long live the atopic multiple!," such could be the slogan of this tendency, re-enforced by the model of the Internet.

This orientation of cognitivism, dear to Francisco Varela, then rejoins constructivism which sees in everything a social construction knotted to the interaction of its elements. This

36

constructivism, very present in Anglo-Saxon thought, is united today with the avatars of [Gregory] Bateson's "systemic." This neo-systemic takes the position that the theories should aim not to define reality, but to facilitate the quality of conversation. This is the case, for example, in brief constructivist therapy. Transposed with psychoanalysis, this also gives the idea that the mind is nowhere, but is supported by an *enaction*, which is to say by an interactive and contingent intersubjectivity, with no necessity of a mental place. If the tenants of this version of psychoanalysis refute any metapsychology, they also refuse the solipsistic and hierarchical vision of *elimitivist* "cerebral" cognitivism aiming for the naturalization without remainder of the mind. But this delocalization of the mind leads its principal defender, F. Varela, to think that, paradoxically, all this leads to demonstrating that cognition is "action on what lacks" and through this to the objective necessity of Buddhism as an ethic! One sees that cognitivism often remains the hostage, in its conclusions, hostage to theses which come from elsewhere, whether they be authoritarian or liberal.

The discreetly *new age* character of cognitivism hence reveals itself little by little. But others, a lot less Zen, consider to the contrary that the biological indeed supposes a law that determines the interactions of living beings. This law is not logical, nor physical, but biological: it is that of evolution and of Darwinism. Social Darwinism, then, finds its foundation in a Darwinian and evolutionist cognitivist psychology of the mental. Psychism is thus subtended by a

new cynicism serving the superior interest of the gene and destined to eliminate the sexual cynicism allegedly supposed by Freud! The perspective of an individual mentality disappears to the profit of a mentality of the population composed either of individuals or of neurons identified with individuals. The future may rest, then, on the disquieting sociobiology of Edward Osborne Wilson. The master signifier that seems to exit through the door of *emergentist* neuronal biology re-enters with considerable hubbub through the window of Neo-Darwinism.

In American psychoanalysis, this biological cognitivism, which hesitates between two sorts of "worst," at the same time re-enforces attachment theories, dear to John Bowlby, and

37

theories of the geneticism of the ego, a new version of an *egopsychology* become cognitive. Likewise, the Freudian partisans of object relations, which are always plastic and modifiable [*remaniabable*], refer us to the neuronal plasticity of the synapses which would also be modifiable through analytic dialogue.

Obviously, neither belief, nor the unconscious "dynamic," which is not only relation, but also thrust and drift, are explained by this genetic path, any more than are the tears Darwin never succeeded in justifying. And does one, then, need to have a mind, even need to be "conscious"? Thus, the partisans of the "bio" mental are not truly more reassuring than those of the mental structured like a *computer* [in English]. Behind this scientific rhetoric new social utopias are being prepared, bringers of barbarism and already lodged in the ecological niche created by the fall of the ideologies of the preceding century.

The Law of the Mental

What, then, can be the law of the mental if the latter is neither software, nor an emergence? An informed mind, Donald Davidson, thinks that what on the contrary characterizes the mental is the absence of a law in the strict sense. This supposes that there are no mental states, but mental events.

If we attribute a mental state to others and, therefore, to ourselves, it is basically out of charity. The idea of the rational animal has as its origin this charity supposed to facilitate communication. If we suppose to the other a mentality, it is simply that we think that what he says does not efface what he wants to say [*veut dire*⁵]. This implies that any examination of the mental supposes an "interpretation" of the data that cannot be reductive and that therefore calls together culture and the ensemble of *savoirs*. Besides, experience shows that the ordinary subject is ruled by an ordinary psychology (*folk psychology* [in English]) quite far from cognitivist scientific rationality, and that belief is inseparable from the very idea of mentality. The mental state, like the symptom, supposes, first of all, that one believe in it. Simply put, the perspective of the symptom marks the place, at the heart of the wanting-to-say [*vouloir dire*] of a wanting-to-enjoy [*vouloir jouir*], as Jacques-Alain Miller shows.

38

Besides, it seems that not everyone here is charitable in the domain of the mental, since one tends today to define autism as the incapacity to attribute to the other, even to oneself, a psychology or a mentality. One could add here mental anorexia which constitutes a difficulty for the subject in considering his ideas or his thoughts as, indeed, his own, constituting his mentality.

One is moreover astonished by the little curiosity of the cognitivists on the terrain of the clinic.

This autistic lack of charity is shared in a way by certain eliminative cognitivists. For them, there is no mental state: this prejudice of ordinary and popular psychology will be eliminated by the definitive naturalization of the mind owed to the advance of the neurosciences which will at last reduce the mental to the physical.

The Mental of Aristotle

Lacan had already remarked that we owe this quite popular psychology of the mental to Aristotle for whom there was an identity between the fact of thinking, the "thinking," and that which is the object of our thought, the "thought" [*le "pensé"*], the world for example. Modern science does not think the world, it writes it in formulas. Science does not master anything and this is why it needs scientism to justify a new social mastery which serves it in the short term, even if it slows down its progress in entangling it in its ideology.

Behaviorism, tainted by cognitivism, does nothing but take up again the soul of Aristotle in the Stoic mode. This soul is supported by corporeal mechanisms supposed to regulate *jouissance*, as Lacan remarks in his *Seminar Encore*. He adds that these mechanisms are cerebral and not born in the heart, as one thought before, which only shows one thing: the Ancients were not afraid of their sentimentality. The soul, which has the passion for unity, supposes the love of the One. This governs its movements. It is therefore necessary to conceive of the One as at the exterior of the soul itself, which opens the door to religion. God is there to make the One lovable or loving.

The error is in believing that these corporeal mechanisms, said today to be neuronal, even "mental," direct the body. The body, in effect, does indeed give to the subject a new

39

substance, neither thinking nor extended: a substance *jouissant*—that enjoys.

Thought-Jouissance

For psychoanalysis, after Lacan, thought is *jouissance* because, for the speaking being, sexual *jouissance* is forbidden. This makes it so that *jouissance* can only take refuge in meaning [*sens*]. Thought comes from the body when it is seized by language, which is why it is also an affect. We are affected by language, which does not go without effects of "thought."

It is not the power of communication that allows thought, but the inertia of language. This inertia supposes the idea that language also produces non-meaning [*non-sens*] and outside-meaning [*hors-sens*] which come from the Other and which make the knot of what makes us, in every sense of the term, "think." Which is to say, what resists our "cognition." Freud demonstrates that this is an effect of sex. It is therefore the sexual Other that causes our thought. Thought aims at leading back to meaning and to the familiar what comes from the sexual Other. Thus, more than a reason, thought is an affect that comes from the Other, but necessarily it misses its aim.

For Freud, thought is born of repression and not the reverse! It is the sexual partner who makes us think. But it is indeed his failure and his absence that make us instead choose to think the world, with, for a correlate, an inhibition to thinking the sexual.

Thinking the world, since the Stoics, exposes man to thinking himself the master of the world and of his destiny. To begin with, man thinks himself, at minimum, as master of his body.

This body also appears, alas, as the body of an other, as a body not so easily mastered, that is, and opens the door to the question of the love of the body, one's own, as that of the Other. The hypothesis of the love that founds the body, from the side of the interest borne to the body of the Other, easily gives way to the mastery that represses the link between the body and love. Saint Thomas, perhaps, preferred the intellect of Aristotle and his mastery to the Christian revelation of love.

40

The *Jouissance* of the Maker of Artifices

Thinking the world is one thing, making the world is another, as Lacan stresses in his *Seminar XXIII*. He who makes the world does not think; he is an artist or a maker of artifices, of images, of words, and of semblances [*semblants*] knotted to the real.

Lacan remarks that this idea of the artist supposes, even implies, a *jouissance* superior to that of thinking. This "divine" *jouissance*, which one attributes to the artist, starts with a *savoir-faire*. We only dispose of a very thin remainder of this creative *jouissance* and it is this remainder that we call the mind [*l'esprit*], which goes further than the mental. It is indeed through negligence or ignorance of this thin *jouissance* that we prefer to lie to ourselves [*nous mentir*]. We lie to ourselves in adoring our body, and we love it, thinking of it as also "mastered," united, autonomous. For Lacan, adoring one's body is the true source of mentality. One can, for all that, adore one's image, or also adore the supposed mechanisms of this body, and tomorrow perhaps one's cerebral image! Inversely, one can also identify this body with the "great all" of interaction, in a dissolution of forms that is not without a link to that real of *jouissance* that Freud labeled masochism.

A Mental without Conflict but not without Symptom

Perhaps we choose to imagine and adore this body for lack of finding a means of gripping its sexual *jouissance* so as to disengage it from the substitutive *jouissance* of our thought. Lacan showed us that Borromean knots could permit this gripping of *jouissance*. They do not give us a model of the mental, but a fashion of approaching it that starts from the error, the *lapsus*. They, in effect, permit a writing of that knowing-how-to-do-there [*savoir y faire*] in play in the practice of analysis. Beginning with this, treating the mental, supposes starting, not from thought, but from what the subject has already begun writing with his symptom. This does not necessitate presupposing a psychic conflict which is, for the IPA, the base of the definition of the mental, but an art of revision [*remaniement*]. This does not necessitate, for the analysand, thinking or, even less, knowing [*de connaître*], but speaking without knowing

41

[*sans savoir*]. On the other hand, this does suppose transference love which supervenes and emerges when one proposes to the subject a new partner that is not the world, nor thought nor the mental, but his symptom as body event.

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Endnotes

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¹ "Mind/Body Shop" is what the graduate students of the novel's cognitive scientist protagonist Ralph Messenger calls the "Centre" where he works (*Thinks . . . : A Novel*, New York, Viking, 2001, p. 37). La Sagna gives this novel's French title, *Pensées secrètes*, a fact worth noting since he will play on the idea of "secret thoughts" later in this essay [translator].

² Lacan, J. *Le Séminaire, livre II, Le moi dans le théorie et dans le technique de le psychanalyse*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1978, p. 339-354; *The Seminar, Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1988, pp. 294-308.

³ The French word *connaissance* can be a little difficult to translate, especially when it comes to specifying the Lacanian distinction between *connaissance* and *savoir*, both of which can be translated as "knowledge." In common French usage *connaissance* can mean knowledge, consciousness, acquaintance (with a person), or a knowledge of a subject matter, author, or thinker. And although the French word *cognition* appears in philosophical contexts, *connaissance* can be used to denote "cognition" in psychological contexts. However, since Lacan himself invokes the "mundane sense" of the word *connaissance* in "Radiophonie" (cf. below), an *écrit* very much focused on the difference between *connaissance* and *savoir*, it is more in keeping with his precedent to retain the French term. Also, the French word *cognition* appears twice later on in this essay (pp. 37 and 40). Translating both *cognition* and *connaissance* as "cognition" would have meant losing La Sagna's distinction between these two terms [translator].

⁴ Lacan, J., "Radiophonie," *Autre écrits*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2001, p. 432.

⁵ *Veut dire* is commonly translated as "means." But in this context La Sagna is clearly stressing the *vouloir*, the "wanting" involved in meaning [translator].