

## THE ILLUSIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PROSPECT OF HUMAN EXTINCTION

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**ABSTRACT:** In the context of resistances to the historical 'blows' to 'human self-love' enumerated by Sigmund Freud (Copernicus decentering the Earth; Darwin removing the barrier between humans and animals; his own efforts in showing how the unconscious subverts the supposed mastery of the conscious ego), Jacques Lacan's early formulations and probings on the topic of subjectivity in his second seminar include, in a not uncharacteristic, but yet somewhat bizarre, digression, an envisionment of 'science fiction' involving the extinction of the entire human population and a recording device which continues to operate following the event. Specifically, Lacan questions what consequences this has for our understandings of consciousness (including subsequent philosophical objections); what status the recording instrument would possess; and what a repopulating society would make of the recorded materials once they had learnt to access and interpret them.

In exploring this scenario, along with what Lacan describes as his 'materialist definition of the phenomenon of consciousness', we will begin to appreciate how the notion of the human becomes a psychical assemblage pieced together to experience a fragile unity. Relatedly, the human species will historically be seen to have carried with it, and continually reinforced, certain fundamental prejudices: cosmological, biological and psychological. What the 'limit' example of extinction will make clear is the extent to which the material world affects the human 'prerogatives' of self-preservation and self-interest.

What is called for is the overcoming of historical preconceptions along with the forms of domination they are invariably coupled with. Recent discussions of extraterrestrial colonization will be seen then to be mere compensatory narratives which ultimately obfuscate the very real – and urgent – need to rethink our misguided sense of 'control'. Does the ultimately destructive (and in some respects irreversible) course engaged in vis-à-vis Earth's natural environment – due to this form of universalized narcissism – necessarily need to be countered with the prospect of humankind's own obliteration in order for change to occur?

**KEYWORDS:** Lacan; Freud; Consciousness; Extinction

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## HUMANITY'S THREE BLOWS

Freud often liked to reminisce on the times in human history when established norms were shattered by scientific developments and wholesale changes in the ways in which people think about themselves and the world. And, of course, there was always an element of self-promotion involved in this: he rated his own 'discovery' of unconscious processes among these epoch-shifting illuminations.

His principal references, returned to across his work, are Copernicus and Darwin. In 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis', an article from 1917,<sup>1</sup> for example, he diagnoses the human being as suffering from a general, universalized form of narcissism, namely 'self-love', which has come into conflict with particularly paradigm-altering scientific innovations in the course of its short history: the three blows as he calls them.

Firstly, a blow against the geocentric view that Earth is the centre of the universe and that humans themselves are "in the centre of a circle that enclosed the external world".<sup>2</sup> This he relates, importantly, to feelings of domination. Ultimately, it was through the findings of Copernicus in the sixteenth century, but also, much earlier, the casting of doubt on the Earth's position in the universe by Aristarchus and the Pythagoreans before the Common Era, that delivered mankind's self-love its first, *cosmological*, blow.<sup>3</sup>

The second blow or form of domination that was shifted concerned the relation of humankind to the animal world. Namely, following the sacralization and worship of animals, i.e. early belief systems, the clear demarcation made between Animalia and humanity, to the advantage, of course, of the latter. Darwin, who clearly resituated this perspective, delivered the second, this time *biological*, blow.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis', in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. XVII*, trans. J. Strachey, London, Hogarth, 1955, pp. 139–141.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> He notes both "Aristarchus of Samos" (*ibid.*) and "Alexandrian science" generally (Freud, 'Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)', in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. XVI*, trans. J. Strachey, London, Hogarth, 1963, p. 285).

<sup>4</sup> Even though Linnaeus eventually classified *Homo sapiens* under Animalia (Kingdom), Mammalia (Class), Primates (Order) in the *Systema Naturae*, with different specifications from the first edition in 1735 to the tenth in 1758, a number of important differentiations were added (e.g. having a soul or mind or being a

The third blow concerns domination of the mind, according to Freud. Introducing the idea that things could be going on which were not conscious to us provided the *psychological* blow, which he says is "perhaps the most wounding".<sup>5</sup> From the universe, to its world and other creatures, to its very self, humanity has had to gradually accept that it is neither master "in its own house" nor at home as such.<sup>6</sup>

The issue, for Freud, is that as the sense of self gradually evolved along with the advanced functions of human cognition, it unfortunately brought with it a sense of mastery and a related feeling of being in control. Therefore, in the commonplace assumption, consciousness, he states, offers the raw material; the human ego organizes it; the will carries out what it has to; and all is good: *Friede, Freude, Eierkuchen* (or peace, joy, pancakes, as the German saying goes).

Crucially, however, the development of the study of mental illnesses from the late nineteenth century onward granted insights which challenged these supposed ideas of unity and mastery. Since the discovery and explication of unconscious processes, we have been able to comprehend that the mind is much more convoluted and home also to "alien guests" which "seem to be

'wise man'). The *similarities* between humans and animals had however been noted in earlier classifications from antiquity onward: the Great Chain of Being and 'missing link' (later corrected as 'last common ancestor') viewpoints fed into these separations.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, 'A Difficulty', p. 141.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141, p. 143; Freud, 'Introductory Lectures', p. 285. Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer contrasts Freud's view with that of Kant who, in his *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, writes:

"Zur inneren Freiheit aber werden zwei Stücke erfordert: seiner selbst in einem gegebenen Fall *Meister* (*animus sui compos*) und über sich selbst *Herr* zu sein (*imperium in semetipsum*), d.i. seine Affekten zu *zähmen* und seine Leidenschaften zu *beherrschen*. – Die *Gemütsart* (*indoles*) in diesen beiden Zuständen ist *edel* (*erecta*), im entgegengesetzten Fall aber unedel (*indoles abiecta, serva*)."

Immanuel Kant, *Werke in zwölf Bänden: Band 8* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 538–539. Quoted in *Martin Luthers Theologie: eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 167. In A. Wood's translation:

But two things are required for inner freedom: being one's own master in a given case (*animus sui compos*), and ruling oneself (*imperium in semetipsum*), that is, subduing one's affects and governing one's passions. – In these two states one's character (*indoles*) is noble (*erecta*); in the opposite case it is mean (*indoles abiecta, serva*).

In M. Gregor (ed.) *Practical Philosophy (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 535. Bayer draws attention to the role of one's 'hidden faults' in the Psalms which Luther acknowledged cannot all be enumerated; hence Freud was not the first to contest the type of view put forward by Kant, he argues.

more powerful than those which are at the ego's command".<sup>7</sup> For example, our unwanted thoughts, desires, actions...

In his Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis from the same period, he notes that the myriad resistances encountered to the ideas promulgated by psychoanalysis are symptomatic of adherence to those previous established values and views of the mind which privilege the unity of the human being and its supposedly advanced position in the order of things.<sup>8</sup> Again, he brings in the colossal historical blows:

In the course of centuries the naïve self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness. This is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus, though something similar had already been asserted by Alexandrian science. The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man's supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature. This revaluation has been accomplished in our own days by Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors, though not without the most violent contemporary opposition. But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind.<sup>9</sup>

While the first of the blows described by Freud is (hopefully) incontestable by now, the second and third still encounter resistances to the present day. In relation to the second, biological, blow, for instance, in addition to religious or moral accounts still favouring the elevation of mankind, most current human societies attempt to maintain a fairly divisive strategy of separation toward the animal kingdom, with, perhaps, notable exceptions: namely the endangered or

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, 'A Difficulty', p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Freud, 'Introductory Lectures', p. 284: In "emphasizing the unconscious in mental life", he states, "we have conjured up the most evil spirits of criticism against psycho-analysis". Yet he urges one to not be surprised at this and attribute it to the difficulty of the concepts or "the relative inaccessibility of the experiences which provide evidence of it".

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 284–285. He would revisit these comments in 'The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis' (in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. XIX*, trans. J. Strachey, London, Hogarth, 1961, p. 221), in 1925, where he uses the term human self-love ("menschlichen Eigenliebe").

domesticated.

This is in fact related to mankind's continuing obsessions with being the dominant/dominating species which in turn has had broader environmental consequences. Indeed we can associate each of the forms of blow – cosmological, biological, psychological – with concomitant forms of domination – that of the planet, that of animals and – due to the false security of the mastery of the self – that of other people.

Moreover, psychologically, while mainstream scientists are increasingly finding neurological evidence of unconscious processes, as well as their influence and importance,<sup>10</sup> there is indeed still widespread resistance to accounts of the human subject where the individual self, whether posed in terms of consciousness or otherwise, is not the "organising centre" of the human being.<sup>11</sup>

Due to a combination of these factors, one particularly salient scenario, which we are looking at today, is that of continuing species and indeed (the prospect of) human extinction. The major recognised human influence contributing to varieties of extinction, as well as making the very planet uninhabitable, is our detrimental environmental impact. One environmental group, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, even argues that the most environmentally conscious and ethical step that we could take would be to cease reproduction and thus remove our species from the planet entirely.

## A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Yet despite the popular focus, in the past decade especially,<sup>12</sup> on pushing nature too far and having irreversible negative effects on the planet, our environmental footprint and the emerging threats therefrom are far from being

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<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, "it is elementary to note that a large number of psychical effects that are legitimately designated as unconscious, in the sense of excluding the characteristic of consciousness, nevertheless bear no relation whatsoever, by their nature, to the unconscious in the Freudian sense". See Jacques Lacan, 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud', in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York, Norton, 2006, p. 428.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. S. Tomaselli, New York, Norton, 1988, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> In academia, politics and popular discourse from Gore to climate change or from *An Inconvenient Truth* to *An Inconvenient Sequel*.

recent discoveries or obsessions. Richard Grove, who established environmental history as an area of inquiry in the modern university, writing in *Nature* in 1990,<sup>13</sup> argued that "the history of anxiety over the environment"<sup>14</sup> may be characteristic of modern Western societies but it is for that matter nothing new.

By the mid-seventeenth century, he notes, there had come to exist an "awareness of the ecological price of capitalism" (defined, in his account, in largely colonialist terms) which had "started to grow into a fully fledged theory about the limits of the natural resources of the Earth and the need for conservation".<sup>15</sup> As early as 1858, Grove found, the threat of human extinction was too raised, tied directly to "'The General and Gradual Desiccation of the Earth and Atmosphere'", as the title of a paper by J. Spotswood Wilson, presented to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, described it.<sup>16</sup> Grove interestingly adds that:

The raising, as early as 1858, of the spectre of human extinction as a consequence of climatic change, was clearly a shocking psychological development. But it was consistent with fears that had been growing among the scientific community. Awareness of species rarity and the possibility of extinction had existed since the mid-seventeenth century as Western biological knowledge started to embrace the whole tropical world. The extinction of the auroch in 1627 in Poland and the dodo by 1670 in Mauritius had attracted considerable attention. Again, the mechanisms of extinctions, and the contribution of man to the process, first began to be clearly grasped on the tropical island colonies.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Grove, 'The Origins of Environmentalism', *Nature*, vol. 345 (3 May 1990), pp. 11–14. See also his *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Grove, 'The Origins of Environmentalism', p. 11. His conclusion, from an analysis of the early history of devastation, following, for instance, the activities of the East India Company and felling of much of the natural vegetation on Mauritius, that "states can be persuaded to act to prevent environmental degradation only when their economic interests are shown to be directly threatened" (*ibid.*, p. 12) is, unfortunately, as pertinent today.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. Hence he argues that:

Time and again from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, scientists discovered that the threat of artificially induced climatic change, with all it implied, was one of the few really effective instruments that could be employed in persuading governments of the seriousness of environmental change.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

It was in fact in Tasmania, Grove notes, that the first Western legislation on the protection of birds was introduced in 1860, which stemmed from these concerns; Britain only followed suit six years later.<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, Grove concludes that at the time "Western-style economic development, spread initially through colonial expansion, was increasingly seen by more perceptive scientists as threatening the survival" of mankind.<sup>19</sup>

Philosophically, it was in the same era that Friedrich Nietzsche recognized mankind's "will to self-depreciation" which had been "unstoppably on the increase" since Copernicus' time: "Gone, alas, is his faith in his dignity, uniqueness, irreplaceableness in the rank-ordering of beings" he argued in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, published in 1887.<sup>20</sup> Following mankind's cosmological dethronement, the human species has been on a "downward path", Nietzsche finds, and "seems to be rolling faster and faster away from the centre".<sup>21</sup> And this view he had indeed contextualized, years earlier, in terms of the insignificance of humanity in its broader natural environment: in *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense* from 1873, he writes: "how pitiful, how shadowy and fleeting, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect appears within nature. There were eternities when it did not exist; and someday when it no longer is there, not much will have changed".<sup>22</sup>

In the present day, as a team from the University of California and the Human Evolution Research Center argue, we are widely regarded as being in the sixth phase of mass extinction in the history of the planet, known as the

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. C. Diethe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 115. The present author would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for suggesting the inclusion of Nietzsche's views on mankind's ultimate inconsequentiality and the devaluation of its consciousness. Nietzsche is indeed even critical of the natural scientific view of the subject, following Darwin, as "eternal": "Involuntarily, all natural science assumes the unity of the subject, its eternity and immutability". See '27[37]' in *Posthumous Fragments* available at [http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1873,27\[37\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1873,27[37]).

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> In *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. and trans. S. L. Gilman, C. Blair and D. J. Parent, New York, Oxford, 1989, p. 246. One indeed sees how Nietzsche foreshadows Freud and Lacan in his re-evaluation of human faculties and capacities: "The arrogance associated with knowledge and sensation lays a blinding fog over man's eyes and senses and deceives him about the value of existence by instilling in him a most flattering estimation of this faculty of knowledge." Ibid.

Holocene or Anthropocene extinction. Mass extinctions are defined as "times when the Earth loses more than three-quarters of its species in a geologically short interval, as has happened only five times in the past 540 million years or so".<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in total, "Of the four billion species estimated to have evolved on the Earth over the last 3.5 billion years, some 99% are gone".<sup>24</sup> This sixth phase, as is increasingly being established, is being caused by humans "through co-opting resources, fragmenting habitats, introducing non-native species, spreading pathogens, killing species directly, and changing global climate".<sup>25</sup>

The prospect of human extinction, while measured on scales between hundreds and thousands of years, to hundreds of thousands of years, it must be added, and by some relegated to the fact of the Sun at some stage burning out, is nevertheless still an anxiety surrounding environmental discourse. The most notable recent context is perhaps that of the colonization of other planets.<sup>26</sup> The following summary by the physicist Mark Buchanan neatly ties up contemporary anxieties and the increasingly – for some at least – less fantastical notion of leaving Earth behind (as opposed, perhaps, to addressing the more serious and immediate concern of our own impact):

Catastrophic events on Earth have previously wiped out many long-lived species, and there's a small but non-zero chance that Earth could, in any given year, get obliterated — by an undetected asteroid or comet, or a nearby supernovae. Or human life might get erased from the planet by our inaction in the face of the pressures we're putting on the biosphere, or by overaction in the form of an out-of-control engineered biological organism. Given enough time, human extinction might be a more or less certain prospect — unless we spread from the planet.<sup>27</sup>

## THE PRIMACY OF THE HUMAN

Why is it then that we react to environmental devastation, scarcity of resources and habitability of the planet only when our own, human, survival is threatened? We will now turn to a scenario of human extinction developed by

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<sup>23</sup> Barnosky et al., 'Has the Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction Already Arrived?', *Nature*, vol. 471 (3 March 2011), p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> I.e. debates surrounding Musk and Mars.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Buchanan, 'Colonizing Mars', *Nature Physics*, vol. 13 (November 2017), p. 1035.



Lacan in his second seminar and see how it ties in to Freud's notion of the 'blows' outlined above.<sup>28</sup> It concerns the psychoanalytic conception of consciousness as well as its consequences for the predominating human views of the world described.

Lacan's famous theory of the mirror stage, where the infant between 6 and 18 months first learns to recognise its reflection, involves some of the first steps in the human attainment of a sense of unity which forms the basis of the supposed mastery of the ego or individual discussed above. This is, according to Lacan

based on the relation between, on the one hand, a certain level of tendencies which are experienced – let us say, for the moment, at a certain point in life – as disconnected, discordant, in pieces – and there's always something of that that remains – and on the other hand, a unity with which it is merged and paired. It is in this unity that the subject for the first time knows himself as a unity, but as an alienated, virtual unity.<sup>29</sup>

Lacan picks up on issues surrounding the blows enumerated by Freud in his second seminar, held from 1954 to 1955, which is focused on the role of the ego in psychoanalytic theory, and adds insights from his developing theories on the subject and the mirror relation. He speaks of the resistances to, and within, analysis broadly and notes the ways in which Freud 'decentred' the human being. Freud, he says

discovered in man the substance and the axis of a subjectivity surpassing the individual organisation considered as the sum of individual experiences, and even considered as the line of individual development. I am giving you a possible definition of subjectivity, by formulating it as an organised system of symbols, aiming to cover the whole of an experience, to animate it, to give it its meaning. And what are we trying to realise here, if not a subjectivity?<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The account is cursory and speculative but nonetheless insightful. Indeed, Lacan notes in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Porter, New York, Norton, 1997, p. 39, that there exists "no plausible reason why reality should be heard and should end up prevailing. Experience proves it to be overabundant for the human species, which for the time being is not in danger of extinction. The prospect is exactly the opposite." Nevertheless, possibilities such as nuclear holocaust, then a present danger, led him to elaborate on the significance of threats to human existence in the same seminar (p. 105).

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

The unconscious, following this account, "is the unknown subject of the ego" which "is misrecognised [*méconnu*] by the ego".<sup>31</sup> But the unconscious is also, for himself and Freud, "*der Kern unseres Wesens*", i.e. the core of our being or existence, our essence.<sup>32</sup> This core, however, "does not coincide with the ego" nor with what we refer to as 'I', as the ego is only a "particular object within the experience of the subject"<sup>33</sup> inside what he terms the imaginary function.<sup>34</sup> "Everything Freud wrote", he goes on to argue, "aimed at reestablishing the exact perspective of the excentricity of the subject in relation to the ego".<sup>35</sup>

In line with the psychological forms of domination based on established norms discussed earlier, Lacan hence defines that which "corresponds to the ego" as

what I sometimes call the sum of the prejudices which any knowledge comprises and which each of us has as individual baggage. It is something which includes what we know or think we know – for knowing is always in some way believing one knows.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, when "shown a new perspective, in a manner which is decentred in relation to your experience, there's always a shift, whereby you try to recover your balance, the habitual centre of your point of view", he explains.<sup>37</sup> And yet, "what the analytic experience highlights," Lacan notes, "and what Freud doesn't know what to do with, like a fish with a fig, are the illusions of consciousness".<sup>38</sup> Here he attempts to undermine the idea of "the transparency of consciousness to itself" and create a 'symbolic', unconsciously

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 43. Or as Evans puts it: "the subject is not simply equivalent to a conscious sense of agency, which is a mere illusion produced by the ego, but to the unconscious". Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 198.

<sup>32</sup> Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Later it will further involve the ego's identifications and counterparts. As Alan Sheridan notes ('Translator's Note', in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1998, p. 279) the imaginary is:

the world, the register, the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined. In this respect, 'imaginary' is not simply the opposite of 'real': the image certainly belongs to reality and Lacan sought in animal ethology facts that brought out formative effects comparable to that described in 'the mirror stage'.

<sup>35</sup> Lacan, *Seminar II*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

overdetermined, pre-'individual' notion of subjectivity.<sup>39</sup>

In the class of this seminar on 'A materialist definition of the phenomenon of consciousness' he asks the audience to consider the visual aspects of consciousness in terms of mirror images. He then makes the digression of asking what the status of consciousness would be in the absence of humans if a device were to record their complete demise.

The following is quoted from his class: in it he clearly separates the notion of human consciousness and that of the ego or individual self;<sup>40</sup> establishes the continual existence of a material reality not reliant on human perception or even humanity; and notes how a camera or recording device can take on an 'I' function which however is not to be confused with the controlling ego...

What is the image in the mirror? The rays which return on to the mirror make us locate in an imaginary space the object which moreover is somewhere in reality. The real object isn't the object that you see in the mirror. So here there's a phenomenon of consciousness as such. That at any rate is what I would like you to accept, so that I can tell you a little apologue to aid your reflection.

Suppose all men to have disappeared from the world. I say *men* on account of the high value which you attribute to consciousness. That is already enough to raise the question – *What is left in the mirror?* But let us take it to the point of supposing that all living beings have disappeared. There are only waterfalls and springs left – lightning and thunder too. The image in the mirror, the image in the lake – do they still exist?

It is quite obvious that they still exist. For one very simple reason – at the high point of civilization we have attained, which far surpasses our illusions about consciousness, we have manufactured instruments which, without in any way being audacious, we can imagine to be sufficiently complicated to develop films themselves, put them away into little boxes, and store them in the fridge. Despite all living beings having disappeared, the camera can nonetheless record the image of the mountain in the lake, or that of the Café de Flore crumbling away in total solitude.

Doubtless philosophers will have all kinds of cunning objections to make to me. But nevertheless I ask you to continue to listen to my apologue. At this point the men return. It is an arbitrary act of Malebranche's God – since it is he who

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 45. Individual but not individuated? See his notion of the unary trait, particularly in the tenth seminar.

<sup>40</sup> Which is part of an ongoing dialogue with Descartes that spreads from the 1930s to the late 1970s.

sustains us in every moment of our existence, there is no reason why he couldn't have obliterated us and a few centuries later put us back into circulation.

Perhaps men would have to learn everything anew, and especially how to read an image. It doesn't matter. What is certain is that – as soon as they saw on the film the image of the mountain, they would also see its reflection in the lake. They would also see the movements which took place on the mountain, and those of the image. We can take things further. If the machine were more complicated, a photo-electric cell focused on the image in the lake could cause an explosion – it is always necessary, for something to seem efficacious, for an explosion to take place somewhere – and another machine could record the echo or collect the energy of this explosion.

So then! this is what I want you to consider as being essentially a phenomenon of consciousness, which won't have been perceived by any ego, which won't have been reflected upon in any ego-like experience – any kind of ego and of consciousness of ego being absent at the time.

You'll tell me – *Just a minute though! The ego is somewhere, it's in the camera.* No, there's not a shadow of ego in the camera. But, on the other hand, I am quite happy to admit that there is an *I* in it – not in the camera – up to something in it.

I am explaining to you that it is in as much as he is committed to a play of symbols, to a symbolic world, that man is a decentred subject. Well, it is with this same play, this same world, that the machine is built. The most complicated machines are made only with words.<sup>41</sup>

Consciousness, then, merely involves "a surface such that it can produce *an image*" which is its 'materialist' definition.<sup>42</sup> An image he defines as "the effects of energy starting from a given point of the real".<sup>43</sup> Like the reflections of light which bounce off of a surface and land on a "corresponding point in space", it is the "fibrillary layers" of the "*area striata* of the occipital lobe", now recognized as a section of the brain's visual cortex, which "behaves like a mirror"<sup>44</sup>:

All that's needed is that the conditions be such that to one point of a reality there should correspond an effect at another point, that a bi-univocal correspondence occurs between two points in real space.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 46–47.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Here he contrasts real space with imaginary space (for instance, the object in the mirror and its material counterpart). However, imaginary, he cautions, by no means is directly equated with the subjective, as there "are illusions that are perfectly objective, objectifiable".<sup>46</sup> Hence he argues that the ego, which is a "structuring image"<sup>47</sup>, itself too "really is an object":

The ego, which you allegedly perceive within the field of clear consciousness as being the unity of the latter, is precisely what the immediacy of sensation is in tension with. This unity isn't at all homogenous with what happens at the surface of the field, which is neutral. Consciousness as a physical phenomenon is precisely what engenders this tension.<sup>48</sup>

In his account, "the tension between the subject – which cannot desire without being fundamentally separated from the object – and the *ego*, where the gaze towards the object starts, is the starting point for the dialectic of consciousness".<sup>49</sup> He will add that "the reflection of the mountain in a lake" is "the myth of a consciousness without *ego*", noting that consciousness "is by essence a polar tension between an *ego* alienated from the subject and a perception which fundamentally escapes it".<sup>50</sup> In the development of the idea of the contemporary human, nonetheless, consciousness has come to take on an almost mystical privilege linked to notions of development, species accomplishment and intelligent life:

Implicitly, modern man thinks that everything which has happened in the universe since its origin came about so as to converge on this thing which thinks, creation of life, unique, precious being, pinnacle of creation, which is himself, with this privileged vantage-point called consciousness.<sup>51</sup>

What the running recording device hence makes clear – existing as the symbolic structure "detached from the activity of the subject"<sup>52</sup> – is that there are aspects of consciousness without a 'self'. In addition, the recorded image

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. The image in the lake or a mirage, for instance.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 49–50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 48. Further, "consciousness is linked to something entirely contingent, just as contingent as the surface of a lake in an uninhabited world – the existence of our eyes or of our ears". Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

involves imaginary space much like our consciousness – a form of reflection of real objects – which is furthermore in a constant relation with the symbolic overdeterminations of language and our interpretations. In this and later seminars Lacan goes to great lengths to redefine consciousness and the unconscious, broadening their definitions and linking each with (and demarcating them from) perception. Our experience of consciousness is continuously imbricated with unconscious material beyond our control, he will argue, the physical nature of both the process and material reality itself, as well as the direction and limits of language.

What the example of the world without mankind shows is that there is no special status granted to an oversimplified notion of human consciousness as the apotheosis of species evolution, revealed in Lacan's, Freud's and indeed Nietzsche's work. Instead, it is the mastery of the human ego, which many conflate unreflectively with consciousness, which has created this conclusion/confusion. And as we saw earlier, this is merely one way in which mankind seeks to justify its stance as dominator.

Hence the 'limit' example of extinction, although the 'return of mankind' Lacan describes may too, like extra-terrestrial colonization, be a compensatory comfort in this narrative, marks the point at which world and the non-'individual' within the human organism meet, the material aspect of mankind independent of the experiencing, reflecting, mastering ego. The contemporary cognizing person, a psychical assemblage pieced together to experience a fragile unity, needs to feel a sense of control of the self, nonetheless, as well as of nature and of the cosmos, which it does not in fact possess. As such, accounts which highlight the degree to which each human being is subjected to the (symbolic and other) structures in which it is embedded, as well as the unconscious processes which undercut its alleged sovereignty, can help undermine this grip.

Overcoming the human cosmological, biological and psychological prejudices, and their corresponding forms of domination, is a necessary step, then, in the drastic bid to alter our role in environmental and species-level devastation in lieu of further displacement measures such as future colonizations. If it takes the possibility of the demise of mankind to confront our universalized narcissism then this should be done head on without recourse to

fantasies of escape. The energy and imagination, not to mention billions of dollars, invested in the latter at this stage in human history need to be redirected toward a sustainable and affirming – for all forms of life – path of stabilization.

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