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The Dark Side of the Loon. Explaining the Temptations of Obscurantism

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Abstract: After contrasting obscurantism with bullshit, we explore some ways in which obscurantism is typically justified by investigating a notorious test-case: defences of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Obscurantism abuses the reader's natural sense of curiosity and interpretive charity with the promise of deep and profound insights about a designated subject matter that is often vague or elusive. When the attempt to understand what the speaker means requires excessive hermeneutic efforts, interpreters are reluctant to halt their quest for meaning. We diagnose this as a case of psychological loss aversion, in particular, the aversion to acknowledging that there was no hidden meaning after all, or that whatever meaning found was projected onto the text by the reader herself.

Keywords: hermeneutics, obscurantism, loss aversion, Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis

"The demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works."

—James Joyce

To the memory of Frank Cioffi (1928–2012)

Let There Be More Light

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE to be deluded by obscurantist writings? "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language", wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher who was, as it happens, himself occasionally accused of obscurantism. The charge of obscurantism suggests a deliberate move on behalf of the speaker, who is accused of setting up a game of verbal smoke and mirrors to suggest depth and insight where none exists. The suspicion is, furthermore, that the obscurantist does not have anything meaningful to say and does not grasp the real intricacies of his subject matter, but nevertheless wants to keep up appearances, hoping that his reader will mistake it for profundity. This promise of a deep insight into intriguing subject matters is often sufficient to lure the audience into a futile quest for understanding.¹

1 Sometimes concepts borrowed from highly technical disciplines like quantum physics or mathematics are invoked, which adds to an illusion of profundity. See Sokal and Bricmont (1998) for a copious list of examples.

Obscurantism (<lat. *obscurans*, “darkening”) should not be confused with bullshit. Bullshitting, according to Harry Frankfurt’s classic analysis, occurs when one does not really care about epistemic attitudes towards the claims proposed, and one demonstrates a lack of seriousness when it comes to normative questions as to what should be taken seriously and what should not. “The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides . . . is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 45). The bullshitter’s pronouncements can be crystal clear; it is just that he does not care about commitments that come with the language game of assertoric language use. Obscurantism, on the other hand, seems to apply, first and foremost, to the content of what is being asserted: although often presented with utmost seriousness and intellectual bravado, it is never quite clear what the obscurantist is getting at, even though he explicitly presents his nebulous discourse as serious and profound insights into some subject matter that, we are told, requires “indirect” approaches.² The charge against the bullshitter is that he does not care about the epistemic status of what he says, whereas the charge against the obscurantist is that we do not have a clue about what he is talking about, and we suspect that he may be dazzling us on purpose. While the bullshitter seems indifferent to truth and to whether his claims are accepted by his audience, the obscurantist has a firm grip on how to tie his audience to his pronouncements. In this sense, the obscurantist is a more dangerous and pernicious character than the bullshitter.

Our case study of obscurantism concerns the reception of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Buekens, 2005, 2006), a cluster of doctrines and “insights” that had a profound influence on philosophy, literary criticism and cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s. We explore a suite of apologetic arguments by followers of Lacan to the effect that the obscurity and multidimensionality of Lacanian theory reflects the very nature of the psychoanalytic unconscious and hence illustrates profound Lacanian insights.³ Such arguments can best be viewed as examples of *epistemic defence mechanisms*, which offer a theory-internal rationale for fending off criticism (as explored in Boudry and Braeckman, 2011). As we will argue, obscurantism works by seducing readers into seeking hidden truths in a text and thereby binding them to pronouncements by getting them engaged in an endless hermeneutic struggle to “understand” the deeper meanings conveyed by the obscu-

2 Neither should obscurantism be equated with “being difficult”. Donald Davidson is often considered a “difficult” philosopher, but few people would argue that his writings were obscure. Crystal-clear prose may conceal lack of arguments – clear and bold assertions have a seductive power. The fact that Quine’s arguments for the indeterminacy of translation, for example, have been reconstructed in various and often inconsistent ways illustrates that eloquent prose does not exclude elusiveness. Still, Quine himself could hardly be accused of obscurantism.

3 We do not, of course, claim that obscurantism in general can be reduced to the use of empty concepts. See *infra* for other rhetorical strategies.

rantist. Obscurantism need not be a *deliberate* exercise in the art of seduction. As we have argued elsewhere (as explored in Boudry and Braeckman, 2011), successful beliefs systems often display an internal rationale, including their appeal to potential audiences, their mechanisms of psychological commitment, and their resilience in the face of critical scrutiny. The obscurantist may be an ordinary impostor, but he may also be deluding himself, or taken in by the belief system. Obscurantism may then simply be seen as a strategy that has been unwittingly tried and tested over time, and without any deception on the part of the obscurantist.

But the author is not the only actor in the plot. We also discuss the complicity of the intended or preferred audience in the creation and maintenance of obscurantism, either by justifying obscurantism or by emulating his style in their interpretations. In the concluding part we put forward a cognitive explanation of how obscure statements force the reader into *accepting the statements as true* and to see their author as a unique *source of truths*. Insights from philosophy of language and cognitive psychology – interpretive charity, loss aversion and the sunk cost fallacy – explain how readers can end up as “followers”.

Obscured by Lacanian Clouds

In “Must Do Better”, Timothy Williamson (2006) has argued that avoiding obscure statements is a token of intellectual courage. The default position seems to be that obscurity is obstructive to communication, and cannot be tolerated without some special justification – as when, for example, we touch areas that fall under Wittgenstein’s notorious “things one cannot speak of”. Even a notorious obscurantist like Nostradamus had a special excuse up his sleeve: he had to make his predictions impenetrable in order to protect himself from the Inquisition. Likewise, readers of Jacques Lacan display at least an awareness of the intellectual virtue of clarity by the mere fact that they devise explanations and rationalizations as to why the Parisian oracle speaks in riddles. The official purpose of their interpretations is often simply to clarify what he said, and when different or even incompatible interpretations see the light of day, this testifies only to the “rich” and “profound” character of his insights.⁴

The core of Lacan’s version of psychoanalysis revolves around a few central themes: the unconscious that is structured as a language, the primacy of the signifier, our inability to grasp meaning and comprehend each other, the fictional structure of truth, the ineluctable “lack” that is the result of our entering the domain

4 Nietzsche (1986) was perhaps too moralistic about obscurantism: “The essential element in the black art of obscurantism is not that it wants to darken individual understanding, but that it wants to blacken our picture of the world, and darken our idea of existence.”

of the Symbolic, the obscure object of desire, etc. Many critics of Lacan have taken issue with the conceptual incoherence of the different versions of his theory (Sokal and Bricmont, 1997; Buekens, 2006; Borch-Jacobsen, 1991). In a summary discussion in the infamous *Livre noir de la psychanalyse* (*The Black Book of Psychoanalysis*), published in 2005, philosopher Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen argued that psychoanalysis, in its many (often incompatible) versions, is an *empty theory* (“une théorie vide”): its key concepts, he argued, are “empty signifiers” that could be interpreted at will (similar conclusions were drawn by Cioffi, 1998). The vicissitudes of such central concepts like *jouissance*, the Other, the *objet petit a* or enigmatic claims such as that *the unconscious is structured like a language* or that *The woman does not exist* are such that no one really understands what they mean or what they have meant in the hands of their originator.

We distinguish two ways in which a theorist can make his doctrine impervious to criticism. On the one hand, he may bring forward external, theory-neutral arguments as a means for deflecting criticism. On the other hand, he may draw on theory-internal arguments and rationalizations for coping with criticism. Boudry and Braeckman (2011) have designated the former “immunizing strategies” and the latter “epistemic defence mechanisms”. Immunizing strategies consist of general and theory-independent arguments, such as *radical relativism about truth* (“truth is always relative to a discourse, so your arguments miss the point since you’re speaking a different type of discourse”), certain forms of social constructivism (“Every discourse creates its own version of the world, so your criticism does not apply to my paradigm”), or general informal fallacies (ad hominem arguments, straw man, false dilemma, etc.). Epistemic defence mechanisms, by contrast, are derived from the theory or belief system under scrutiny, which makes them particularly interesting for explaining its seductive power and internal rationale. We concentrate on the latter in the remainder of this article.⁵

Conceptual Obfuscations

Lacan’s pronouncements are couched in a number of highly abstract and complex concepts – the Other, the Symbolic, the *objet petit a*, *jouissance*, the Phallus, etc. – which are notoriously difficult to understand. Indeed, even among Lacanians there is no consensus about their meaning (Nobus, 1998) and deep theoretical divides continue to exist within the Lacanian community. An instructive example is the

5 The conceptual distinction between theory-independent and theory-internal arguments made here is not a strict one. An argument that was initially developed as an immunizing strategy may over time be integrated into the structure of the theory (e.g., the elusive nature of *psi* in parapsychology), thus blurring the distinction between immunizing strategies and defence mechanisms (Boudry and Braeckman, 2011).

pivotal concept of the *big Other*, which Lacan characterizes as an abstract “locus” in the psychic structure of the subject that can be “occupied” by a range of different signifiers/objects. These are said to *represent* or *function as* the Other for the subject. If one consults and compares different Lacanian interpreters, it turns out that the Other can stand for other individuals, society, the law, moral order, the mother-figure, the psychoanalyst himself, the opposite sex, a person’s own body, Language, images or even – according to Slavoj Žižek – the simulated reality in *The Matrix*. While it is argued that all these phenomena are said to “occupy” the “position” of the Other, no meaningful conceptual unity can be discerned. A close analysis of the Lacanian literature reveals that concepts like *the Other* function as *container terms* with which any anthropological phenomenon can be described. In a paper entirely devoted to the concept, Derek Hook characterizes “the Other” as a “vanishing-point of inter-subjectivity”, as “simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’”, and that the Other is “both embodiment of the social substance and yet also the site of the unconscious” (Hook, 2008, p. 51).

Lacanian theory suggests a straightforward intra-theoretical justification for these theoretical problems, which appeals to Lacan’s idiosyncratic version of Saussurian linguistics: *Of course* the concepts of the Other and the Real are difficult to explain coherently, we are told by the Lacanian theorist, because meaning can never be fully grasped, and as human beings we will always be trapped in a web of signifiers. Lacan teaches us that signifiers can only refer to other signifiers, and together they form a closed system from which we can never escape. When we speak, we are not aware of what we are saying. “‘I’ is spoken by a desire outside my consciousness that drives me” (Verhaeghe, 2004, p. 56), and thus we *are being spoken* (‘ça parle’)” (Lacan, 1966). According to Madan Sarup, the unconscious “becomes not only the subject matter but, in the grammatical sense, the subject, the speaker of the discourse. . . . Lacan believes that language speaks the subject, that the speaker is subjected to language rather than master of it” (Sarup, 1992, p. 80). Indeed, some Lacanians believe that the very nature of the subject matter of Lacanian theory escapes rational discourse and scientific evaluation (Leguil-Badal, 2006). As Lacan himself put it, “The real, one has to say, is without any law. The genuine real implies the absence of law. The real does not have any order” (Lacan, 2005, pp. 137–138).⁶

Similarly, we are told that the many apparent paradoxes and contradictions in Lacan’s theory reflect the divisiveness and structural “lack” characterizing the human subject. According to Lacan, when the child is introduced into the Symbolic order, the psychic structure of the infant develops into “knots” that are irreducible

6 Original text: “Le réel est, il faut bien le dire, sans loi. Le vrai réel implique l’absence de loi. Le réel n’a pas d’ordre.”

to theoretical formulation and always escape comprehension. Lacan has designated this ineluctable lack as the locus of the *objet petit a*, a concept which, as Lacanian interpreter Bruce Fink himself acknowledges, “can take on many different guises” (Fink, 1997, p. 52). According to Lacan, the *objet petit a* is that aspect of the Real that cannot be represented, that forms a structural break in the chain of signifiers. “The [object] *a* is what remains irreducible in the advent of the subject at the locus of the other, and it is from this that it is going to take on its function” (Lacan, 2004, p. 189). The later Lacan coined the term “sinthome” for that which is beyond meaning and unanalysable in the so-called topology of the human mind. Other Lacanian concepts fulfil similar roles:

The Borromean knot marks the outer limit of Lacanian theory, the point where the formalising ambition of the *matheme* finally collapses into the non-theorizable, the untranslatable real of the symptom. (Thurston, 1998, p. 158)⁷

In the same vein, some Lacanians have tried to explain (and justify) the institutional crisis of psychoanalysis in theory-internal terms. Reflecting on the many theoretical schisms following the death of Lacan, and the feuds over his intellectual legacy, Nobus writes that knowledge is always “in a state of continuous dispossession”, and this has (of course) something to do with the mysterious Other:

If psychoanalytic knowledge is by definition a knowledge in failure, isn't the crisis legitimacy a necessary precondition for the discourse of the analyst to sustain itself? Perhaps the only agency that could ever be in the position of owning psychoanalysis is the (unconscious of the) analysand, the Other of psychoanalytic discourse . . . (Nobus, 2004a, p. 222)

It seems then that one can construe Lacanian arguments to the effect that the very idea of “questioning” the truth of Lacanian psychoanalysis is deeply misguided, because according to Lacan truth itself has a “fictional structure”. As Lacanian interpreter Bruce Fink wrote in relation to the question of the scientific value of Lacanian theory:

The fact remains that *science is a discourse*. . . . it implies a dethroning of Science and a reassessment of science as *one* discourse among many. . . . Lacan's discourse theory suggests that there are as many different claims to rationality as there are different discourses. (Fink, 1995, p. 138)

Another intriguing defence mechanism in Lacanian psychoanalysis directly appeals to Freud's conception of dreams as decipherable rebuses in the

7 This theme has been taken up in the postmodern literature, by people like Derrida and his followers. “The play of difference ensures that meaning is always divided from itself. Reading is a kind of ongoing experience of this internal division in, and dispersion of, meaning”, writes Josh Cohen (2010), à propos Jacques Derrida. Ask yourself: if you really understand what this means, you will inevitably agree with it. If you disagree, you can always be accused of being a superficial reader who “doesn't understand Derrida”.

Traumdeutung (Freud, 1953a, 1953b).⁸ We are told that Lacan's work is a "rebus", just as dreams are: underneath a manifest dream content is hidden a latent dream content, the correct reconstruction of which will reveal a web of repressed desires that cast a shadow over the dreamer's life (Lacan, 1966, p. 470). Freud's model of the dream and its alleged meaning can easily be applied to Lacan's writings:

It does not seem unfair to characterize Lacan's writings in this way (as a rebus) . . . [f]or their substance deals with the nature of the unconscious as Freud understood it, hence with that dimension of human experience that lies beyond the ken of conscious, rational discourse and emerges into awareness only through a din of diffraction that may assume many forms – in the case of dream, for example, the form of a rebus. By saying, then, that Lacan's work, in terms of its substance, is a rebus, we mean to suggest that it is dealing with a theme that of its very nature escapes the constriction of rational exposition. (Muller and Richardson, 1982, pp. 2–3)

Madan Sarup develops the *Imitation Argument* as follows:

Lacan's writings are a rebus because his style mimics the subject matter. He not only explicates the unconscious but strives to imitate it. The unconscious becomes not only the subject matter but, in the grammatical sense, the subject, the speaker of the discourse. Lacan believes that language speaks the subject, that the speaker is subjected to language rather than master of it. (Sarup, 1992, p. 80)

Sarup appeals to Lacan's theory of the subject as constituted by language or discourse: "language speaks the subject" and "the subject is not the master of its discourse". As Lacanian Paul Verhaeghe put it:

From an analytic point of view . . . the subject does not speak, it is spoken. As a result, the subject floats on top of spoken words. Indeed, when "I" speak, I do not know what "I" am about to say, unless I am reading it or have learnt it by heart. In all other cases "I" is spoken by a desire outside my consciousness that drives me, sometimes with approval, sometimes without. And what I do say always comes, in the final analysis, from the Other. (Verhaeghe, 2004, p. 56)

Lacan, we are told, serves as mouthpiece of the unconscious; his discourse is a perfect (and therefore instructive) *imitation* of the unconscious.⁹ Dany Nobus (2004b, p. 196) seems to confirm this view when he holds that Lacan "modeled his own discourse on the very rhetoric of the unconscious which he believed to have discerned in Freud's foundational accounts of dreams, slips of the tongue and jokes".

Muller and Richardson (1982, p. 3) argue that Lacan's *Ecrits* and the *Séminaires* are "essentially a concrete demonstration in verbal locution of the perverse ways of

8 Of which Lacan said: "Cet ouvrage ouvre avec l'oeuvre sa route royale [*via regia*, says Freud in "über Psychoanalyse", MB & FB] à l'inconscient" (Lacan, 1966, p. 509).

9 The verbal puns and wordplays in Lacan's discourse are justified as follows by Stanley Leavy: "The theoretical basis of (his) playing with words is found in Lacan's dictum that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. In his playful punning this claim is concretized, embodied. The unconscious can speak truthfully, revealing the identity of the logically unrelated, cognitively distorted, affectively confused experiences" (Leavy, 1983, p. 13).

the unconscious as he experiences it". Analogous remarks can be found in Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986, p. 13) and Caudill (1997, p. 5).

What to make of these claims? One of the central tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis holds that humans are trapped in a web of signifiers, that the real meaning of words can never be grasped, that any interpretation runs against an *objet petit a* (see below) resisting further description, and that communication "never succeeds" (Verhaeghe, 2004). Thus, we are told that Lacan's obscure theorizing and his expository writing style are "a performative expression of the subject matter of the theory itself".

For many followers these are suggestive and plausible explanations and perhaps even justifications of Lacan's obscurity. Ironically, the allegedly inscrutable character of a theory's subject matter entails that every effort to present Lacan's conception of the unconscious in a more or less streamlined fashion will eventually end up as a fatal *distortion* of the theory's subject matter. Any attempt to present his thoughts in a systematic, orderly way will therefore fatally *misinterpret* him (and the unconscious). Moreover, if we are to understand Lacan, we must assume that his discourse is the expression of his unconscious which is itself "structured like a language".¹⁰ But here his readers are taken hostage: the Lacanian insights reveal themselves only if one takes the theory to be a correct imitation of the unconscious. If one denies that Lacan's simulation is faithful to the nature of the unconscious, the real content of his theory will never reveal itself to the reader. The hermeneutic circle drawn by Sarup and others is so tight that there is no space left for reasonable dissent, and both the theory and its interpretations are conveniently immunized against criticism.

The Rationale of Epistemic Defence Mechanisms

From the critical outsider's perspective, to rely on arguments that presuppose the truth of the theory one tries to defend for justifying its obscurity is obviously question-begging. But this observation hardly reflects the persuasive force of such arguments in the eyes of those who use them. The conspiracy theorist, for whom the very existence of adverse evidence attests to the extreme cunning of the conspirators, and in whose eyes disbelievers are themselves involved in the evil plot, offers a prime example. To argue that conspiracy theorists already *presuppose* the truth of the conspiracy, and are thus engaged in a form of circular reasoning, will evidently be to no avail in debating them. Indeed, the fact that

10 "Le symptôme psychanalyzable . . . est soutenu par une structure qui est identique à la structure du langage . . . la structure du langage telle qu'elle se manifeste dans les langues que j'appellerai positives, celles qui sont effectivement parlées par les masses humaines" (Lacan, 1966, p. 444).

a belief system can account for seemingly adverse evidence, that it makes the existence of disbelievers intelligible (and even predicts their existence), constitutes compelling evidence for those who are already committed to the belief system in question.

We now understand why, at least from a Lacanian point of view, any attempt to criticize the conceptual structure of the theory,¹¹ to object to its wilful obscurity or to request clarity of exposition, will reveal a lack of understanding of the Lacanian insights about language, truth and reality. We also begin to see why Lacanian interpreters are unimpressed by critics objecting to the conceptual vacuity of his central claims. The fundamental tenets of Lacanian theory about the *objet petit a*, the primacy of the signifier and the divisive nature of the human subject are analysed in ways that the epistemic defence mechanisms for deflecting valid criticism always apply. They ensure that a critical analysis of Lacanian theory never succeeds in affecting the system.

A key tenet in the rebuttal of this epistemic defence mechanism is the unwarranted inflation of Lacan's pronouncements in the restricted context of psychoanalytic therapy to profound insights into the structure of language, ordinary communication, the status of knowledge, and even the nature of reality ("the real"). (To be sure, these extrapolations of psychoanalytic insights were already instigated by Lacan himself, particularly in his later years.) In the act of projecting the theoretical flaws and paradoxes of their own "discourse" to *any* theoretical endeavour and elevating them to deep linguistic and epistemological insights, Lacan and his interpreters have immunized the theory against any form of criticism. For those impressed by Lacanian theory, the pronouncements of the Master about language, meaning and reality *in general* are compelling partly because they constitute such a remarkably apt account of the *Lacanian edifice itself*. After all, what better illustration of the primacy of the signifier over the signified and the elusiveness of meaning than Lacan's own ever-shifting and esoteric conceptual apparatus? From the theory-internal perspective, the critic of Lacanian psychoanalysis is reduced to a reader who is not attentive to the divisive dimension of subjectivity, to someone who deliberately ignores the elusive *objet petit a* of all our strivings, and who clings on to old-fashioned illusions of objectivity and transparency. He refuses to "understand" Lacan. Unfortunately, the Lacanian psychoanalyst has confused the conceptual and epistemic predicament of his own belief system for that of the rest of the world. Paraphrasing Karl Kraus, one of Freud's earliest critics, Lacanian psychoanalysis is itself the disease for which it claims to be the cure.

11 Note that our analysis does not have any bearing on Freudian psychoanalysis, which we have criticized elsewhere and on different grounds (Boudry and Buekens, 2011; Buekens and Boudry, 2012).

The Lunatic Is in My Head: The Trap of Obscurantism

The obscurantist exploits a number of cognitive mechanisms that enable normal communication. To explicate what goes on, we first introduce the distinction between understanding a speech act and properly accepting it. When X asserts that p , his intended audience is believed (by the speaker) to be in a position to understand the sentence uttered, but only when the audience also accepts what X asserts, will the audience have acquired the belief that p . Acceptance of a speech act requires a conscious decision on behalf of the intended audience, based on information about the perceived credibility of the informant, the circumstances in which he speaks and other contextual clues that are not themselves derived from the content of the speech act. The kind of speech act itself determines what proper acceptance consists in. For example, I accept your promise to ψ only if I am prepared to hold you responsible for not ψ -ing at some designated future moment. The understanding/acceptance-distinction, due to Austin (1962), is a crucial characteristic of human communication: semantic and illocutionary intentions can be successfully recognized by the intended audience, but understanding an utterance does not require acceptance.¹² Acceptance of an assertion is a post-semantic decision in the sense that understanding is *conceptually prior* to acceptance, although the latter is the ulterior goal of a speaker. Sperber et al. (2010) point out that our sense of epistemic vigilance essentially depends on this distinction: we do not and should not believe everything we are told.¹³

The conceptual priority of understanding over acceptance does not reflect the hermeneutic order of things, i.e., the strategies we employ to uncover what a speaker means and wants us to accept. When we embark on understanding the content of what someone asserts, we sometimes focus on what it would be reasonable for the speaker to believe in the circumstances and then *solve* for the content of what he asserts. That is, very briefly, one aspect of the *principle of charity* or *rational accommodation*, which is itself an aspect of the cooperative nature of communication: a speaker provides evidence to her intended audience for the correct recognition of her semantic and illocutionary intentions, while the audience reconstructs, on the basis of that evidence and other contextual clues, what the speaker must have meant (Grice, 1989). The key idea is that evidence for what is

12 Semantic intentions and illocutionary intentions are successfully executed only if the intentions are recognized by the audience. Speakers intend to be understood.

13 This seems to be a uniquely human phenomenon: “There is no strong evidence or argument for distinguishing comprehension (understanding) from acceptance in non-human communication” (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 365).

meant (the content of the utterance) can sometimes be identified only if we assume that what the speaker utters is true and thereby expresses a belief we *could* accept. If the content of an assertion is a *prima facie* false or implausible, we normally assume that we must have misunderstood the speaker, and seek to reconstruct a more charitable interpretation. While we do not believe everything we are told, there is thus an important sense in which we appeal to what *can* be plausibly maintained in order to infer what the speaker meant (Davidson, 1984; Sperber et al., 2010). We reconstruct a content for the assertion that would be a plausible *candidate* for acceptance, and this in order to understand the speaker correctly. Note, however, that charity and cooperative behaviour in conversations do not make acceptance mandatory. Normal applications of the principle of charity tentatively ascribe true beliefs to the speaker in order to understand his assertions, but charity does not require that you yourself accept the particular assertion you are trying to make sense of. Charity is consistent with epistemic vigilance.

The obscurantist's strategy is a perversion of this cognitive mechanism: his unspoken promise is that you will understand him full well – you will grasp the hidden meanings and acquire a profound insight – but not before you *accept* his assertions. We discern three features which tend to weaken reasonable sensitivity to the distinction between understanding and acceptance in Lacan's intended audience.

First, to lure the intended or preferred audience into accepting an assertion or set of assertions, the obscurantist should first of all convince the reader that there is indeed a deep and profound insight lurking underneath the surface of his *prima facie* incomprehensible statements. The obscurantist's hope is to persuade the intended reader that the hidden treasure, the true meaning, is indeed so valuable and so revealing that he is willing to invest a huge hermeneutic effort in trying to understand whatever his hermeneutic efforts indicate as the “true meaning” of what Lacan says. As Lacan himself put it in a defiant mood: “L'écrit, ça n'est pas à comprendre. C'est bien pour ça que vous n'êtes pas forcés de comprendre les miens. Si vous ne les comprenez pas, tant mieux, ça vous donnera justement l'occasion de les expliquer” (Lacan, 1975, p. 35). What is in normal conversation extrinsic to understanding – acceptance of what is asserted – now triggers the desire to understand: “*these pronouncements contain deep truths about myself that I must accept, so what he says must make sense.*” In the case of Lacan, the accepted purpose comes down to grasping the true nature of the (Freudian) unconscious. Lacan defines the purpose (“I offer you a deep insight”), while the bulk of the hermeneutic work is up to the reader. This has an interesting consequence. When interpreting Lacan his readers inevitably rely on their own beliefs and assumptions about the unconscious to fill in the true meaning of what Lacan asserted. As a consequence, none of his readers agree about what Lacan “really” meant or said: their background beliefs about

something as elusive as the unconscious are too divergent to lead to compatible interpretations.¹⁴

The second feature is that Lacan's pronouncements are supposed to give us knowledge by testimony: he speaks as an authority we should rely on. According to Sperber et al. (2010), excessive application of interpretive charity is typical for the deferential attitude towards religious authorities, gurus and other persons with inflated reputations:

If [people] were to check the pronouncements of these sources (for instance, "Mary was and remained a virgin when she gave birth" or Lacan's "There is no such thing as a sexual relationship") for coherence with their existing beliefs, they would reject them. But this would in turn bring into question their acceptance of the authority of the source. A common solution to this predicament is to engage in a variant of Davidsonian "charitable interpretation", and to "optimize agreement" not by providing a clear and acceptable interpretation of these pronouncements, but by deferring to the authorities (or their authorised interpreters) for the proper interpretation, and thus accepting a half-understood or "semi-propositional" idea. (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 382)

While every interpretation requires a certain amount of charity on behalf of the intended audience, it cannot be allowed that, in order to understand what is being said, one must defer to the expert on every level. This, we suggest, explains why almost every interpretation of Lacan begins with an explanation of his obscurantism, and then goes on trying to understand him under the supposition that everything he says is true: the obscurantist presents himself as the authority who possesses knowledge – he provides *testimonial knowledge* and he alone, on the basis of his psychoanalytic practice, can provide this. This rules out the possibility for his audience to seek independent confirmation or evidence for what Lacan is claiming, which is a key feature to move from understanding what is asserted to accepting what he is being told. Both features – the promise of a deep insight and the essential testimonial character of the pronouncements – erode the reader's sense of vigilance.

The third feature – introducing signifiers with "open meanings" – has its roots in another natural way of proceeding when we do not understand a contribution to a conversation: confronted with a word you do not understand, the natural way to proceed is tentatively to accept the statement in which it occurs as true and to "solve for" the semantic value of the newly introduced word (this principle reflects Frege's sound principle that only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning). The obscurantist exploits this hermeneutic strategy by safely assuming that the reader will *accept* his statement *no matter what meaning he (the reader) has assigned to the new signifiers*. Any interpretation offered by the interpreter will

14 Note that this doctrine was canonized in post-modernism. Reading a text came to be seen as "difficult", and was made the subject of theories, training; only books written by experts would offer interesting "readings". "It always seemed as if everyone else was doing it better", writes Thomas Karshan (2011), "... but no one ever felt sure what doing it well really meant".

inevitably impose an *ad hoc* meaning to the Lacanian signifiers, and yet allow the reader of Lacan to believe that he has gained an important insight – the one he imposed on the text. The flip side of this phenomenon is that Lacanian concepts are all too easily applicable: those who “understand Lacan” can apply his key concepts at will and always give a “Lacanian interpretation” of the phenomenon at hand. Because of its lack of interpretive constraints, Lacan’s “open discourse” creates limitless possibilities for applications to works of art, movies, politics, culture, etc. As Frederick Crews (2006, p. 61) put it in another context, it “leaves an academic interpreter without even a mathematical chance of having nothing to say”. The interpreter who “understands” Lacan inherits authority from Lacan when he disseminates and applies the Lacanian concepts. He must now be recognized as a disciple and he too provides us with essentially testimonial knowledge – he basically testifies what Lacan has meant and derives his authority from having understood the master. Since his pronouncements too use the Lacanian signifiers and no effort at disambiguation can do justice to Lacan’s contradictory pronouncements (Evans, 1996), obscurantism spreads within the Lacanian community like a contagious disease. Other features that trigger excessive charity in the reader include denying the obvious and/or confidently asserting the non-obvious. Combined, they explain what Borch-Jacobsen has dubbed the “emptiness” of the key Lacanian notions.¹⁵ The strategic role of this hermeneutic game of smoke and mirrors is to turn the process of attempting to understand Lacan into an interminable hermeneutic exercise – so demanding of time and intellectual resources that irrational forms of loss aversion start to kick in.

Loss Aversion and the Sunk Cost Fallacy

We have not yet explained how the excessive hermeneutic effort required to understand Lacan makes it hard eventually to reject what he claims. First, consider how few interpreters of Lacan have actually criticized him (see Evans, 2005, for a notable exception), or compare how hard it is to criticize Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for example, or Derrida’s *Glas*, even when the “profound insights” are often trivial, absurd or wholly derivable from common sense (Shackel, 2005).¹⁶

15 A famous example of “denying the obvious” was Baudrillard’s statement that “the Gulf War Has Not Taken Place”. See Norris (1992) for a rejoinder.

16 Schopenhauer (1965, pp. 15–16) on Hegel: “If I were to say that the so-called philosophy of this fellow Hegel is a colossal piece of mystification which will yet provide posterity with an inexhaustible theme for laughter at our times, that it is a pseudophilosophy paralyzing all mental powers, stifling all real thinking, and, by the most outrageous misuse of language, putting in its place the hollowest, most senseless, thoughtless, and, as is confirmed by its success, most stupefying verbiage, I should be quite right”.

Which cognitive mechanism explains the connection between excessive hermeneutic efforts and the tendency eventually to accept the “reading” arrived at?

Our explanation appeals to two related psychological phenomena explored by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). As Lacan’s readers invest considerable time and intellectual effort in deciphering his writings, they are gradually putting themselves in a position where a significant amount of loss aversion can kick in. In economics and decision theory, loss aversion refers to people’s tendency to prefer avoiding losses to acquiring gains. The idea – empirically confirmed in countless experiments – is that someone who loses 100 euros will lose more satisfaction than another person will gain from a 100-euro gain. If your financial or intellectual investment turns out to be a failure, you will be reluctant to accept your losses precisely because your decision (to accept or reject losses) will be influenced, irrationally, by your past investments. Your refusal to accept losses may cause you to lose even more money, for example when a stock goes further down. Loss aversion is closely related to the *sunk cost fallacy*. Rationally speaking, retrospective (past) costs that cannot be recovered should play no role in making decisions about the future. But they do play a role. Suppose a ticket buyer has two options when he realizes he does not like the movie: (I) sit through the whole movie or (II) leave the cinema and do something more agreeable. A rational actor bases his decision on whether he wants to see the rest of the movie regardless of the ticket price. Since the second option involves suffering in only one way (spent money), while the first involves suffering in multiple ways, the second option is obviously preferable.

Both psychological tendencies are exploited by the obscurantist. Consider that interpreters almost always agree with what the obscurantist is supposed to have pronounced (how many introductions and “readings” of Lacan contain sections critical of Lacan?). Rationally speaking, no matter how much time and intellectual energy an interpreter has invested in studying the obscurantist, that fact itself should not affect his evaluation of the content retrieved and of further pursuit-worthiness. However, having invested an immense amount of research time in trying to reconstruct what is supposed to be the “correct” interpretation, the overcharitable interpreter is no longer willing to admit that there was no deeper meaning at all, that his efforts were wholly unrewarding or that what he ends up with is a trivial insight, something we knew all along. Loss aversion in this case takes the form of a reluctance to accept that the gains were not worth the hermeneutic effort. The interpreter avoids accepting his losses exactly the way someone who has bought a losing stock refuses to acknowledge his bad investment. Buying even more stocks would thus be equivalent to clinging onto the Lacanian belief system. The irrational trader incurs ever larger debts, while the follower of Lacan is wasting ever more time in a hermeneutic treadmill leading nowhere. Just

as the price paid for a stock is irrationally taken to be the benchmark for its real value, so the gigantic hermeneutic efforts are taken as indicative of the real value of the “insights” gained. To justify his past investments, the gullible follower will constantly apply the Lacanian framework to new cases, in the hope of finding more hermeneutic treasures there, even when it has become transparent to any impartial observer that there were no new insights in the first place.

Conclusion: Hanging on in Quiet Desperation

What James Joyce claimed of his literary work should not serve as advice for philosophers. The effects of obscurantism are pernicious because the honest reader or interpreter is forced to stretch principles of rational accommodation and interpretive charity to unreasonable limits: while a legitimate presumption of truth is a natural attitude in hermeneutics, in the case of Lacan the reader is forced into a position such that if she does not *accept* as true what is being said, she will never understand what the speaker intended to communicate. In normal communication there is a limit to the charity that readers are willing to extend to obscure theorizing.

Nevertheless, we should not be too confident of our ability to resist the temptations of the obscurantist’s promise and our capacity to avoid being taken in by him. If readers attempt to take a critical distance from the theory, or to question the deep insights that are supposedly hiding there, they are immediately sucked back into Lacanian doctrine by the attractive force of its epistemic defence mechanisms, as if they were trying to escape from a black hole (Law, 2011). Any critical reflection is transmuted into further illustrations of profound insights. Moreover, Lacan’s promise of meaning and insight is accompanied by a threat: if you claim you do not understand him, if you hold that his pronouncements are meaningless, you are dismissed as failing to have understood him, to have lived up to his requirements. The reader is thus taken hostage not only by Lacan but also by his interpreters, who attain the status of the guru’s infallible mouthpieces.

Traditional approaches to obscurantism put the blame squarely on the author (Carnap blaming Heidegger, Foucault blaming Derrida), depicting readers as passive victims intimidated by mystifications. We have argued that readers and interpreters themselves share responsibility for defending and spreading obscurantism and that they can be actively involved in the creation and maintenance of seductive mythologies: once they are fascinated by the search for a promised hidden meaning, and once they have experienced the seductive power of epistemic defence mechanisms, they will try to find ways to make sense of the pronouncements of the text under scrutiny and further legitimize its obscure character. Taking Lacanian psychoanalysis as a case study, we have illustrated how readers are taken hostage by

the pronouncements of the author, and how they end up rationalizing and justifying obscurantism on their own accord.¹⁷

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17 It would be an interesting question to further explore how essentialist tendencies in our psychological make-up enhance and support our eagerness to look for hidden meanings. See Bloom (2010).

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