

Notes on an ontology in Lacan: a dialogue with Heidegger

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Abstract: This study aims to discuss the possibility of an ontology in Lacan's work, based on the status of ethical unconscious presented by him in 1964. We try to establish relationships between the Lacanian concepts of unconscious, ethics and time and, through them, a dialogue with the conception of temporality in Heidegger, in order to demonstrate that the Lacanian unconscious is not only linguistic, but also ontological.

Keywords: unconscious, ethics, time, ontology, being-toward-death.

During his 1964 seminar on the four fundamental concepts of Psychoanalysis, while drawing a parallel between the way he understands the Freudian unconscious and his own way of thinking it, Lacan (1964/2008) speaks of the relationship between the cause and what it affects, saying that there is always lameness inherent in it. According to Lacan, what Freud finds on the characteristic hiatus of the cause is something of the order of the non-realized, to which Freud referred as the dream's navel. What is produced in this hiatus, once presented, is lost again, i.e., from a temporality that presents itself as a discontinuity, as a hesitation in a cut of the subject, and reemerges as a find – the desire – in which the subject is at some unexpected point; it is the subject as indeterminate. In introducing the unconscious through this structure of a hiatus, Lacan is questioned by Miller about his ontology and answers that it is an ontological function, but that it would be better to say it is a pre-ontological, forgotten but essential characteristic of the unconscious, and not to fall into the scope of ontology: “it is neither being nor not-being, but something non-realized” (Lacan, 1964/2008, p. 37). And he proceeds, in an attempt to answer: “The status of the unconscious, which I indicate to you as very fragile in the ontic plane, is ethical” (Lacan, 1964/2008, p. 40). “Ontologically then, the unconscious is the elusive – but we can surround it in a structure, a temporal structure, of which it can be said that it has never been articulated, thus far, as such” (Lacan, 1964/2008, p. 39).

This article is intended to discuss these claims from Lacan, not in the sense of focusing particularly on these concepts, but, through the questions brought forward by them, establishing relationships between unconscious, ethics and time. We start from this apparently contradictory relationship: does it not fall into the scope of ontology, but we apprehend it in a temporal structure? How do we speak of time with no mention of ontology? Lacan withdraws his concept of unconscious from this field by saying it is ontically fragile and ethical, but by saying that despite being evasive we can apprehend it in a temporal structure,

and end up resuming it. The more immediate question is in regards to this relationship between the unconscious and time, as, according to Freud, the unconscious is atemporal. According to C. I. L. Dunker (in the class taught at the Espaço Cult on February 26, 2015, as part of the course Lacan and Philosophy), the unconscious is an atemporal, system, as is language, but the subject of the unconscious is not. The logical times, the instant of seeing, a time of understanding, a moment of concluding; are subject times; signifying scissions, ways of dealing with the subjective division, of a linguistic nature on the one hand, but also of an ontological nature on the other.

As covered by Lacan (1936/1998) with his analysis of the sophistry of the three prisoners, the logical times make the temporal and not spatial structure of the logical process prevail, in which the subject transformed possible combinations into three times of possibility by capturing, in the modulation of time, the absorption and resorption that establishes the succession and its genesis in the logical movement. It is through this modulation that the subject can, as Lacan shows us, reach the assertion about self and conclude the movement that leads to a judgment and to the act of departing. This act is motivated by rushing, where Lacan points out a similarity to the ontological form of anxiety, which is reflected in the expression “for fear that” the delay generates the error:

In other words, the judgment that concludes the sophistry can only be borne by the subject that formed the assertion about himself, and cannot be imputed to him without reservations by no other – unlike the relationships of the impersonal subject and of the reciprocal undefined subject of the first two moments, which are essentially transitive, since the personal subject of the logical movement assumes them in each of these moments. (Lacan, 1936/1998, p. 207)

As we see, the truth of the sophistry depends on its “assumption” to be confirmed, a truth that manifests itself alone in the act that generates its certainty, but which is

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only achieved in a logical relationship of reciprocity. We do not intend here – to relate unconscious and ethics – to delve deeper into the logical time, which is a fundamental question for clinical management, as it has already been studied extensively by Lacanians; we will also not delve deeper into its linguistic nature. We thought of approaching this issue by the other side as mentioned by Dunker (in the class taught at Espaço Cult on February 26, 2015, as part of the course Lacan and Philosophy), the side of the ontological nature, which we believe is pointed to by Lacan in this text in the logical times, when associating the assertion about self to a truth that is borne alone, when relating anxiety to a temporal tension, and when pointing to the relationship of that, with a presumption of truth, which is necessarily related to the future.

If in clinical practice we are interested in the discourse and not conducting ontology, we need to remember that this discourse, in each session, is encrypted by a temporality, and we need to consider that there is something unapprehensible in time, that the modal times do not coincide as is assumed by our imaginary and, especially, that, according to Lacan, thinking of the subject is thinking of it in time and as negativity. To think of ontology and the question of time, we resort to Heidegger, not because we consider that Lacan was Heideggerian is not what this is about, but rather due to the influence that Heidegger's work had on Lacan's thought and also due to the relevance of the theme in the first phase of the philosopher's thought – on which we focus in this article. In *Being and Time*, a major work from this phase, Heidegger (1927/1996) seeks to show that the sense of the comprehensive project is time; to think about this phenomenon is to think that man is not a being simply given in time, he is time; constantly remade from a world and the world from the self. Here begins our difficulty because, according to Heidegger, being and subject are opposing concepts in the history of philosophy; they are incompatible, the concept of subject would be exactly one of those responsible for the oblivion of the being in the history of Western philosophy. Even so, we believe that Lacan makes strategic use of Heideggerian's thought, he employs the concept of being-toward-death, treated in *Being and Time* and that can only be understood based on the temporal and ontological dimension of his. What we will attempt to demonstrate here is that Lacan also makes use of this concept so he can think of an ethical and non-ontic unconscious.

First, let us focus on this being-toward-death in Heideggerian philosophy and, to this end, we will have to go through some concepts developed in *Being and Time*, a work in which Heidegger's philosophy can be understood as a constant questioning, a search for the revelation of the object that he himself decides in regards to this questioning, and which guides the movement that seeks to unveil it; this is the question about the being, a central element of his philosophy. This questioning is confused with the very renovation of the theme on the

being in Western philosophy, which becomes a privileged space for its unveiling. The search for this path is the search for what the entity is as such, the path of the entity from the point of view of the being. According to him, this resumption of the question about the being means, at first, questioning its sense, which makes it necessary to bring out an entity that questions its own being – as designated as Dasein.¹ The existential analysis of Dasein should seek the fundamental ontology from which others can originate, since this entity has a multiple primacy (ontic-ontological) over all others.

The analysis of the fundamentals of Dasein, with which Heidegger primarily deals in *Being and Time*, constitutes the first challenge in the questioning about the being; this entity should be able to show itself and for itself in its average quotidianity, as first of all and most of the time. This is, according to him, an incomplete and provisional analysis, with the aim of opening the horizon to an interpretation of the being on more authentic ontological bases.

This analysis finds its fundamental constitution, the being-in-the-world; this being emerges as the cure in its originating nexus with facticity and decay, and the totality of its structures, which only becomes comprehensible from the temporality – recognized as its originating ontological fundament – and whose own sense becomes, reciprocally, more transparent through the analysis of Dasein. According to Heidegger, from the ontological point of view, Dasein is, in principle, diverse from all being simply given, its essence is founded on the “autoconsistence” of oneself and its being is conceived as the cure; the determination of the ontological sense of the cure consists precisely in the liberation from temporality, Dasein always comprehends itself somehow, it always precedes itself: as it has already projected itself for certain possibilities of its existence, while also projecting the existence and the being. If the essence of Dasein is existence, in liberating its ontological structures in their temporal sense, the author seeks to comprehend the being-toward-death; quotidianity as mode of temporality; the manner in which Dasein is and can be historical; how it constructs the common and traditional count of time and thus prepares a more originary comprehension of temporality, in which the project of a sense of the being in general can be realized. A project with which he believes he can review history with modes of oblivion of the being, and which would enable us to think of the being as clearing, opening; thinking of the origin of this being. It would also enable us to think of the destiny of this being, in which the future has primacy: being is coming to be.

The world is already there, open to Dasein, which is the only way it can deal with an instrumental

1 In the edition we used (1996), the translation of Sein und Zeit to Portuguese chosen to translate Dasein as pre-sença (pre-sence). In this work, in case of literal quotation, we will maintain the option of the translator. For the rest, we chose the term in German, which was also the option taken for the new bilingual edition (2012).

nexus, comprehending something as conjuncture. And what if the being of this being-in-the-world is founded on temporality, this should enable not only this being-in-the-world, but also the transcendence of this being-in-the-world. In attempting to understand Dasein even more originally than in the project of its own existence, Heidegger leads us to the extension of Dasein between birth and death, the context in which somehow it maintains itself, associating temporality and historicity. The characterization of this context consists of a sequence of “experiences lived in time” and is based on the assumption of something simply given “in time.” However, Dasein is not the sum of the momentary realities of its experiences lived; and determining it as something simply given “in time” is, according to Heidegger, doomed to fail:

Through the stages of its momentary realities, the pre-sense occupies neither a path nor a section of the life already simply given. On the contrary, it extends itself in such a way that its own being is already constituted as an extension. In the being of the pre-sense, there is already a “between” that refers to birth and death. (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 179)

The movement of existence is determined by the extent of Dasein, and Heidegger designates it as happening, the “context” of Dasein is the ontological problem of its happening. “Releasing the structure of the happening and its existential and temporal conditions of possibility means conquering an ontological understanding of historicity” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 179). The guiding principle for the existential construction of historicity is therefore characterized as being able to be all in the own sense of Dasein and the analysis of the cure as temporality; since it always exists as a historically proper or improper entity. By analyzing its historicity, the author seeks to clarify that this entity is not “temporal” by existing in history, but rather that it only exists historically because it is temporal. There are questions raised about the primacy of the “past” in the concept of history, as Dasein can never be a past, since in its essence it is never something simply given; whenever Dasein is, it exists. By characterizing it as historical he is not only referring to an entity in the flow of the history of the world; it is in the sphere of temporality that should be sought as a happening that determines the existence as historical. Thus, its originary happening lies in its own decision, where it is free towards death and transmits itself into an inherited possibility and, nevertheless, chosen. Heidegger calls this phenomenon destiny. In the being-with-others, its happening is a conjunct happening, the happening of the community, the common thrownness. Thus, it may suffer the blows of destiny because it is destiny while being-in-the-world opened to come to encounter:

destiny demands for its being the constitution of the cure, that is, the temporality. Only as death, debt, conscience, freedom and finitude coexist, as in the cure, in an equally originary manner, in the being of an entity, is that it can exist in the mode of destiny, that is, it can, deep in its existence, be historical. (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 191)

However, the interpretation of the temporal character of history did not consider that all happening takes place “in time” and that Dasein only knows history as an intratemporal happening. Heidegger understands that in order to make it ontologically transparent it is necessary to clarify the ontic-temporal interpretation of history, which would allow us to recognize the temporality and the intratemporality as an origin of the common concept of time. Dasein, existing, has time, takes time, and wastes time, albeit without understanding existentially the temporality.

The philosopher then continues in the direction of showing how Dasein, as temporality, can “have” or “does not have” time. If in quotidian life he finds the time in the manual and in the being simply given that comes to encounter in the world, the how and why form of the ordinary concept of time, then it requires a clarification of this occupying with time. The being-in-the-world, while being among the entities who come to encounter in the world, is announced in the questioning and discussion of that with which it deals. The occupation is founded on the temporality and on the mode of an actualization that attends and retains: “It is by attending that the occupation is pronounced in the ‘then’, it is by retaining that it is pronounced in the ‘erstwhile’ and it is by actualizing that it is done in the ‘now’” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 216). The actualization interprets itself in this questioning and discussion. It is called time, this actualization, that attends and retains interpretation itself, that is, what is interpreted in the “now”. The ordinary comprehension of the time understands the time as a sequence of nows, fluent and endless, which arises from the temporality of the decadent Dasein. The temporality, usually, is only known in the interpretations of the occupations. Thus, the time becomes accessible with the opening of world, as it is always occupied with the discovery of the intraworldly entities. Since the thrown and decadent as Dasein is, most times, it lost in the occupations, we can say that in this perdition is announced the escape covering its own existence, that is, residing in the escape of death:

While looking away from the finitude, the improper temporality of the decadent and quotidian pre-sense should ignore the proper future and, thus, also the temporality in general. It is precisely when the impersonal directs the ordinary understanding of the pre-sense that the ‘representation’ of the ‘infinite’ of public time is consolidated, which becomes oblivious to itself. (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 237)

With death being only “understood” existentially in its own sense in the anticipatory decision, the impersonal never dies and misunderstands the being-toward-the-end, where to the end, it always “has” time. Thus, what it knows is not the finitude of the time but a time that still comes and passes; the time that levels and belongs to everyone, that is, to no one. However, despite all it covers, the discourse of the passage of time somehow reveals an unstoppable willingness to stop time. Therein resides the public reflection of the finite future of Dasein’s temporality: “The pre-sense knows the fleeting time through the ‘fleeting’ knowledge of its death. . . . And it is because even death can be covered in the discourse of the passage of time that time shows itself as a passage ‘in itself’” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 238).

With Heidegger we can understand that being is something that apparently denies the being, this not-being, this negative, is proper of the being; capable of apprehending in the being-toward-death; only thus can it exist in the mode of destiny, that is, be historical. With Lacan, we can say that the being would be this time warp, this tension that somehow moves the prisoner of sophistry, as previously stated. Also with Lacan, we can think of death as a universal symbol – which we interpret as castration; that is, if in symbolizing we make operations by taking castration into account, as a resource, death and the law are parts of the operation, standing as the major symbol of this instance of negativity. In Heidegger, “between” the originary and this being-toward-death (as future), we make our version of the oblivion of the being. In Lacan, if, in taking into account this symbolic operation we consider the symptom as an entity paralyzed in time, suspended in its history, then it is in this “between” that we make our version of the oblivion of the desire.

According to Dunker (during a class taught at Espaço Cult on February 26, 2015, as part of the course Lacan and Philosophy), Lacan uses Heidegger exactly to think of what this origin of the being of the subject would be, where does it come from? And Lacan answers with Heidegger, but also with the influence of other thinkers and mainly with Saussure’s linguistics, this place is the language – a condition for the subject and for the unconscious, from whence everything comes.

Nevertheless, according to Dunker (in the class taught at Espaço Cult on February 26, 2015, as part of the course Lacan and Philosophy), if we also have here a resonance with that which Lacan understands as a symptom, forgetting that which we are denied as positive existence, as a kind of entity, fixed in time; Lacan can draw from Heidegger something he does not find in another thinker: when we dissolve the symptom, we transform the metaphor of the symptom into the metonymy of the desire. The interpretive gesture transforms the metaphor into metonymy. And what happens while this linguistic transformation is taking place? Moment of care; evanescent, the subject appears in its lack to be. Even if

for an instant,² even if to be followed by the alienation, at that instant the analysis does that: it remembers the being, the being as a lack to be, towards death, as negativity, opening; and this is Heidegger and is Lacan. In Lacan:

There is no other good but that which can serve to pay the price for access to the desire – as this desire we define elsewhere as a metonymy of our being. The creek where the desire is situated is not just the modulation of the signifying chain, but that which runs underneath, which is, properly speaking, what we are, and also what we are not, our being and our not-being – what in the act is signified, passes from a signifier to another in the chain, under all significations. (Lacan, 1959-1960/2008, p. 376)

Here we resume our hypothesis about theontology in Lacan: what does the Heideggerian being-toward-death in its temporal and ontological perspective have to do with the fact that Lacan affirms that the status of the unconscious is ethical and not ontic? What does ethics, as Lacan understands it, relate to the being-toward-death? We know that by proposing that the unconscious has a structure of language, he introduces the dimension of desire; shared desire, for recognition. Having language as originary, the analysis can be read as the invention of a law, of an ethics, which is consonant with desire, as, according to Lacan, it is desire that supports the unconscious theme, the proper relationship that makes us take root in a particular destiny. However, as we have seen, this law, or this ethics, is invariably marked by a lack of being.

Lacan (1959-1960/2008) then resorts to the Greek tragedies, and through the reading of the Theban trilogy of Sophocles, mainly of *Antigone* (2001), brings this other dimension to ethics, tragic, as it would be that there would reside the experience of the human action. In tragedy what is at stake is not a kind of true happening, but the hero and his surroundings, which are situated in relation to the point of view of desire. He also proposes another ethics, in response to that related to moral values and to the service of the goods, or rather, proposes psychoanalysis as an ethics – of the desire, distinguished from the protocol modes and from utilitarianism, establishes further knowledge, he elects the truth of the subject and makes its singularity prevail.

According to him, the heroes of Sophocles are always characterized by isolation, by solitude; they are characters who are initially situated in a boundary zone between life and death; where the good cannot order everything without appearing as an excess and that which

2 Thus, we reiterate our initial hypothesis that in the text of the logical times, the equally ontological nature of the unconscious was already pointed to by Lacan, by associating the assertion about self to something that is borne alone, by relating anxiety with a temporal tension, and by pointing out its relationship with a presumption of truth that is necessarily related to the future.

is granted by this good is essentially ambiguous, where there are two distinct dimensions: “on the one hand the earthly laws, on the other hand what the gods order” (Lacan, 1959-1960/2008, p. 326). Antigone puts herself in this boundary, where she feels unattackable, and where no mortal can disregard the laws, or rather, something that is of the order of the law, but that is not developed in any signifying chain: “This is the horizon determined by a structural relationship – it only exists through the language of words, but shows the insurmountable consequence of such” (Lacan, 1959-1960/2008, p. 328).

By defending her brother as something unique – a defense that arises in the language of the indelible character of what it is – and putting herself in this insurmountable boundary, beyond anything that can be inflicted upon her, Antigone maintains the value of her being, a value that, according to Lacan, is essentially of the language, as the language hides everything that occurs. For Antigone, life is only approachable from this boundary in which she has already lost her life, approachable while the bearer of this signifying cut that grants her the power to be what she is: she embodies pure desire, she is the one who has already chosen death. We can say then that Lacan presents the function of desire in a fundamental relationship with death, or rather, in a boundary zone,

repelled beyond death; It is not about common death of which he is speaking, that which the common man is always trying to avoid, but about a true death, in which he himself eliminates his being. We understand death here in the same way as Heidegger, as we mentioned previously, in which man, in a decision of his own, free to die, throws himself in a possibility that is inherited and, nevertheless, chosen. A phenomenon that Heidegger calls destiny and whose being requires the temporality, for it can only be historical thusly. Similarly, what Lacan shows us is that it is always through some surpassing of the boundary that man makes the experience of his desire; this is what he calls the triumph of death, it is as if death were appropriated as choice and it is in this that Antigone presentifies beauty as a function of a temporal relationship, in its apprehension in the punctuality of the transition from life to death and tells us of a desire that is man’s relationship with his lack of being. Therefore, we can say that this desire in Antigone makes the relationship we addressed here between unconscious time and ethics of psychoanalysis evident and, by returning to the ethical, the ontologically evasive unconscious that we mentioned at the beginning of this article, while understanding why it can be apprehended in a temporal structure although, as Lacan says, is of the order of the non-realized.

Notas sobre uma ontologia em Lacan: um diálogo com Heidegger

Resumo: Este estudo busca discutir a questão de uma possível ontologia na obra de Lacan a partir de seu estatuto do inconsciente ético de 1964. Procura-se estabelecer relações entre os conceitos lacanianos de inconsciente, ética e tempo e, através deles, dialogar com a concepção de temporalidade em Heidegger, a fim de demonstrar que o inconsciente laciano não é ético apenas por sua natureza linguística, mas também pela ontológica.

Palavras-chave: inconsciente, ética, tempo, ontologia, ser-para-a-morte.

Notes sur une ontologie dans Lacan : un dialogue avec Heidegger

Résumé: Cette étude vise à discuter la question d’une ontologie possible dans l’œuvre de Lacan à partir de le statut éthique de l’inconscient présenté par lui en 1964. Nous cherchons à établir des relations entre les concepts lacaniens de l’inconscient, d’éthique et du temps et, à travers d’eux, dialoguer avec la conception de la temporalité chez Heidegger, afin de montrer que l’inconscient lacanien n’est pas éthique seulement du point de vue de la linguistique, mais aussi de la ontologie.

Mots-clés: l’inconscient, l’éthique, le temps, l’ontologie, l’être-pour-la-mort.

Notas sobre una ontología en Lacan: un diálogo con Heidegger

Resumen: Este estudio tiene como objetivo discutir la cuestión de una posible ontología en la obra de Lacan a partir de su estatuto del inconsciente ético de 1964. Tratando de establecer relaciones entre los conceptos lacanianos del inconsciente, ética y tiempo y, mediante estos, dialogar con la concepción de la temporalidad en Heidegger, con el fin de demostrar que el inconsciente laciano no es ético solo por su naturaleza lingüística, sino también por la ontológica.

Palabras clave: inconsciente, la ética, el tiempo, la ontología, el ser para la muerte.

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