



## Nature versus Nurture

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*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines “nature” as “The inherent or essential quality or constitution of a thing; the innate disposition or character of a person or animal or of humankind generally. Also, an individual element of character, disposition, etc.; a thing or person of a particular quality or character; a kind, a sort, a class”.<sup>2</sup> One immediately sees why Lacan dismissed this commonly held concept of nature. In his “Lacanian Biology and the Event of the Body,” Jacques-Alain Miller makes a further distinction between Lacan’s theory of what constitutes the “essential quality [...] of a thing,” and the lumping together of the word “nature”

with an animal organism or with biology or trees, and flowers, etc.<sup>3</sup> I will return to that later, but for the moment I shall describe Lacan’s idea of how a thing is constituted. There is no *a priori* essence or nature of a thing, he argues, following the Existentialist thinkers of the mid-twentieth century. Existence precedes essence, they claimed, thus getting rid of the notion of some innate property of character or mind, and, in the process, dispensing with the idea of an innate soul inhabited by some God. Lacan argues that the Ur-lining of the infantile subject is made up of the real of partial objects-cause-of- desire which give rise to four partial drives: the oral, the anal, the invocatory, and the scopic.<sup>4</sup> These are quickly taken up by the way things are represented to an infant by language and words. Each person is *subject-ed* to the language which fixates him or her in a way of being. A radically autistic child is torn between being a living body and having no way to re-present this to the other through language. Thus, the drives control his or her life. Current work done in the USA and other countries as well attributes autism to biology and works with autistic children via developmental models of thinking and treatment. Lacanians work with autistics to help them suffer less at the hands of the pure real which makes them bang their heads, or avoid the gaze of the other/Other, or stifle the invocatory drive. Confusion between the mouth as a receptacle for eating and other corporal openings marks the “behavior” of autistic babies. At one moment in history, such children were thought to be bad children or demonically possessed, or whatever cultural metaphor describes the *sinthome*/symptom that links these three dimensions together—or *not* as in the psychoses, which include autism—as the particular outcome of a child’s taking on being in reference to her mother’s *unconscious* desire correlated with some signifier for the function of law which Lacan named “the Father’s Name.”

That the mother’s desire is unconscious enters largely



into one's conception of nurture. The OED defines "nurture" as "Breeding, upbringing, education, as received or possessed by a person [...]. The process of bringing up or training a person, esp. a child; tutelage, fostering care [...]". Also, "social environment as an influence on or determinant of personality (opp. *Nature*).<sup>5</sup> Thus, one may encounter *La Leche League* who believes that a mother cannot provide good "nurture" unless she breast feeds, while aristocratic ladies of the past were told they could not nurse their children lest they become feeble. That was the job of wet nurses, etc. etc. Yet, Lacan discovered that the most concerned and apparently nurturing mother may create psychosis in her child if there is not a strong enough Father function to give the child the sense of difference over sameness, or "no" as opposed to a lack of boundaries. Paradoxically, a mother who gives her children much love and a sense of discipline, but for whom the child is not the phallus she lacks, is not all to her, has a better chance of raising a well-adjusted child. That mother may direct her principle love towards her husband, or even towards a career. The point of the mother's *unconscious* desire is that she may do everything the "right" way—according to socio-historical conventions-- but raise a disturbed child if she unconsciously does not want that child, or unwittingly imposes her distaste for a husband onto a child, and so on. Thus nature is not what it seems to be—i.e. intrinsic—, and nurture is a thorny path that it is not what it seems to be either.

The mirror-stage theory Lacan advanced in the 1930s and 1940s also gives rise to an understanding of how the human being is not unified. This theory was inspired by the French psychologist Henri Wallon (1931) who observed that both chimpanzees and human infants were capable of recognizing themselves in a mirror at around six months of age. What Wallon found significant is that while the chimpanzee would quickly lose interest, the human infants became fascinated and would spend much time entranced by the phenomenon of the mirror image, exploring the seeming connections between their bodies and the reflected image. For Wallon, it was significant that the child had succeeded in distinguishing what one might call two levels of the visual. The child can see parts of itself in the flesh and parts of itself reflected in the mirror. That the child seemed to distinguish these two sights can be understood as pointing to some transition between an imagistic (Lacan's imaginary) grasp of the world to a representative (or Lacan's symbolic) one. Lacan developed Wallon's discovery to argue that the encounter with the mirror is pivotal in the emergence of the



child's identity insofar as one identifies oneself on the basis of an external, reflected image.<sup>6</sup> The result of this early mirror fixation between image and body means that the infant is pushed back and forth between anticipation and insufficiency. That is, the drama of motor to walk and perform other bodily functions smoothly means that humans start out experiencing themselves as *incomplete*, although the mirror seems to offer a picture of some completion to come.

Culture is filled with images of reinforced bodies, from Robocop to Batman. Such images of fragmentation and orthopaedic reinforcement attest to Lacan's point that our identity is fundamentally bodily and, thereby, impossible. Rigid identities attest to the rupture of a continuum of inside and outside. The result is that the body in pieces finds its correlate in fantasies of completion. Beyond this the child depends on its mother's desire, a desire to which it can never be adequate. The opposition of desire and instinctual needs threatens the subject, bearing out Lacan's claim that there is no *natural* body or identity. A child matures only by abandoning instinct and negotiating cultural demands, as well as desires. Such a theory belies any belief in an *autonomy* of self which is so central to so many ideologies. An always distorted and partial idea of self which was introjected cannot be the ground of an autonomous being in the world. The ego, consequently, misrecognizes itself.

Thus, although I am going to speak of the normative, there is really no *normal* in Lacan insofar as we are all beset with issues. In Lacan's teaching one is confronted with ways of understanding "behavior" via differential diagnostic categories: the normative (master discourse), the neuroses (obsession and hysteria), the psychoses (autism, paranoia, schizophrenia, manic-depression), and perversion. Although these categories follow Freud, their meanings differ in Lacan's clinic and theory from those Freud gave them. I will not explain the categories here; however, it is best that they be stated as a way to comprehend the differences between conscious ideas of what one thinks nature or nurture is, and the realization that it is the unconscious which is the master of the game.

It is not surprising that Lacan developed four different kinds of discourses spoken by those who are not psychotic and that these discourses are defined as that which makes a social link. What these discourses have in common is that they all speak from an awareness—conscious or not—that

there is a lack- in-being, that one is not a 'Totalized' subject as the psychotic believes he or she is. And lack joins being and language to the body.<sup>7</sup> The normative person speaks a master discourse, staying within the field of conscious language and within the terrain of what the social Other determines as 'right' or as accepted conventions. This discourse represses the unconscious as fantasy and as the truth of what is excessive in *jouissance* and, thereby, hides the actual 'truth' of the subject's symptom.

It is what I refer to as Church or Country Club discourse. It is clean, antiseptic, and lets sleeping dogs lie. This is what Miller describes as "a body of knowledge (*savoir*), the body that knows what is necessary to survive, the epistemic body. Second, the libidinal body [...]. To state it in a third way...[rather than] the ego-body [...is] the other, the body-*jouissance* which doesn't obey the ego, which is exempt from the domination of the soul as a vital form of the body"<sup>8</sup>. It is within this second type of body event affecting language that one finds the hysteric's discourse erupting into language when she is burdened by her symptom and unleashes her unbridled and unrepressed *jouissance*. "The symptom," says Miller, "[is an] event of the body".<sup>9</sup> Between the master discourse and the hysteric's, lies that of the university, one which speaks from canned, ready-made concepts wherein truth and knowledge are conflated. The final style of discourse is that of the analyst, the one listening for the non-sense of unconscious truth, the only truth seen as going beyond the lies, misrecognitions, and misunderstandings of conscious, normative discourse.

Given Lacan's four structures of discourse, one can see how concepts of "nature" or "nurture" would vary depending upon who is speaking to whom. Moreover, the discourse, like the mirror stage—marked by four places and four terms—disrupts any idea of a unity of self in consciousness.

Thus, with all the universalising good efforts made by concepts such as "nature" or "nurture," one always comes back to the reality, with Lacan, that we relate to the in terms of our image of ourselves, even though it is only an image. In psychoanalytic treatment, the goal is to lead the analysand to the point of being "no-thing." Except for the subjective particularities that one retains from the Other's desire, one finally realises that one is 'One' among all others who are also nothing. Although this is the basis for an initial depression, it is also the moment of freedom from the shackles of signifying identifications that have burdened any subject



throughout his  
or her life. It is, paradoxically, the  
basis for a sharing of “humanity” one with the other. And this arises from the transference  
which is love, the  
only possibility for bridging the impossibilities in being and body.

Ed.

by Nancy Gillespie and Jesse Cravens

## Endnotes

1. This paper was presented at Humanities Unbound: Psychoanalysis, Life, and Dignity. Norfolk, Virginia, at Old Dominion University, April 19-20, 2018, on the 20th, 2018 and at Lacanian Compass Clinical Study Days 11 on “Delights of the Ego,” on February 11, 2018 in New York City.
- OED (vol. 2, 1993) I dedicate this to my medical Dr. brother, Gene, who asked me for a piece on nature vs. nurture.
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