Desiring Agency

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the relation between agency and the (pathological) inclinations that lurk beneath the agent's acts. We draw on the work of Jacques Lacan to argue that an adequate understanding of agency demands attentiveness to desires, the unconscious and the intimate relation between the subject and the Other. Based on some of the key features of the Lacanian subject we suggest agency to be (1) symbolic, (2) imaginary, or (3) ethical. This typology of agency, we argue, has far-reaching implications for social analysis in which we include the project of critical management studies.

Keywords: Lacan, agency, desire, ethics, resistance

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Introduction

`Agency' has come to assume a central role in social theory as the agency-structure debate has become a taken-for-granted template for the orientation of social scientific analysis. In the field of management and organization studies, a concern with agency may be traced back at least as far as Silverman's The Theory of Organizations (1971) where, inspired primarily by Berger and Luckmann's (1966), the agent-centricism of `the action frame of reference' is counterposed to the structure-centricism of `systems theory' (see Willmott, 1994). While some scholars have endeavoured to bypass or dissolve the distinction (e.g. Latour, 1999), a majority has either assumed or defended the necessity of taking the template seriously, a position concisely summarised in Wikipedia:

> `The debate surrounding the influence of **structure and agency** on human thought and behaviour is one of the central issues in sociology. *In this context "agency" refers to the capacity of individual humans to act independently and to make their own free choices.* "Structure" refers to those factors such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs etc. which seem to limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have'
> (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure_and_agency, our emphasis).

The agency - structure relation is central to contemporary social theory, yet discussions of agency and/or structure routinely sidestep the question of the relation between the agent and desire. At best, there is an appeal to some version of ego-psychology in which the agent is characterized by its conscious, self-reflexive faculties. So, it might be thought that the question of desire is either irrelevant to social analysis or adequately attended to by agency-centric analysis.

Against these dominant stances, we explore an alternative view that involves a consideration of the (*un*)intentional relation between the agent and agency and the concomitant issue of how this (*un*)intentional relation is linked to structures. Our focus is upon agency but our approach takes us away from established positions in social science where its significance is either minimised by structure-centric analyses or where agency is conceived primarily in terms of a capacity to act independently and make free choices such that the influence of what is unconscious assumes the status of a mere supplement. Specifically, we explore the relevance of Lacan's exposition of the human subject which, we argue, holds out the prospect of allowing us to deal with issues of desire and de-centring without falling prey to determinism. Our comparatively modest intent is to set out, in schematic form, some key elements of Lacan's thinking as a preliminary step for further advancing emergent work in which his ideas are being applied to the field of management and organization studies (Jones and Spicer, 2005; Contu and Willmott, 2006; Roberts, 2005). In doing so, we wish to further explore Lacan's account on structures and subjects in which he `maintains and defends *both* concepts – structure and subject – in a rigorous theoretical framework' (Fink (1995: 35) . This framework, which we attempt to sketch out in the course of this paper, significantly differs from both Cartesian and ego-psychological interpretations. It does not simply put the subject in the centre of the analysis but, more importantly, shows how the subject is the subject of both unconscious structures and decentrement. In setting out this reading we wish to advance an intelligible account which could serve as an introduction to Lacan.

However, this endeavour is not without difficulties. As Fink explains: `The difficulty for the reader of Lacan's texts is compounded by the fact that his attempt to isolate the subject takes many different forms at different points in his teaching, not all of which seem to converge on any easily recognisable conception of subjectivity' (ibid). One aim of this paper is to provide some clarification of Lacan's distinctive formulation of `subjectivity' and, more specifically, its status in the context of his distinction between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

Lacan, we contend, offers a way of resisting the compelling attraction of established formulations of agency as encountered in diverse versions of the agency-structure template by taking an alternative, negative ontology of subjectivity as its point of departure. This involves a refusal of the erasure of `agency' by a deterministic structure but, equally, a problematising of the sovereignty ascribed to, or wished for, agency. Instead of assuming an autonomous self, with well-articulated preferences, we take up the challenge, articulated most powerfully by Lacan, of conceiving of the subject as split, thereby permitting an appreciation of how desire has a greater significance for how we act and interpret acts than is allowed in established accounts on agency (and structure). By advancing a notion of the agent that is predicated on a negative ontology, we challenge the common assumption that the agent either is a free and self-reflexive entity or is a constrained and fully pre-determined category. To avoid this *either/ or* dilemma, and without taking recourse to a simple golden mean, we explore a number of the repercussions of following Lacan's elaborations of human subjectivity, most notably, the implications of transference, desire and the unconscious.

We begin by sketching the broad parameters of Lacan's thinking and then connect these to poles of social analysis presented by the structure-agency template. We then explicate what we take to be a distinction - between the ego and the subject – that is key to appreciating the distinctiveness of Lacan's thinking. This incorporates an exploration of the significance of the Other and the nature of what Lacan terms the `split subject'. These reflections provide the basis for the presentation of a typology of agency where we distinguish three possibilities of agency (subject, ego, ethical) and their associated registers (.symbolic, imaginary, Real). Finally, we draw out some possible implications of taking Lacan seriously for social analysis and for critical management studies with respect to the understanding of emancipation and resistance.

Enter Lacan: An Overview

Lacan's work incorporates at least three elements that are relevant for rethinking what is conventionally conceived as `agency' and, by implication, its relation to `structure'. First, Lacan challenges the idea that the human subject is most persuasively or adequately understood as a conscious, intentional, and reflexive being. Indeed, he strenuously denies that these alluring qualities have anything to do with the conditions of sociosymbolic engagement insofar as the impulses and desires that compel actions are not immediately accessible to human subjects. For Lacan, sociosymbolic activity is animated by the signifier that the subject carries. It is by virtue of this signifier that the subject comes to be represented to other subjects and, by extension, is turned into a subject with an agential capacity (Lacan, 1998a:207). Thus, Lacan states that "man is nothing but a signifier" (1998b: 33). With these direct, yet also rather cryptic, remarks, Lacan

attempts to reveal "that the signifier's displacement determines subject's acts, destiny, refusals, blindness, success, and fate, regardless of their innate gifts and instruction" (Lacan, 2006: 21). The subject is, in other words, thrown into an already established milieu, predicated on language. In this regard, the subject has no other origin than that of the symbolic; and, in this sense, for human subjects there is "no such thing as a prediscursive reality. Every reality is founded and defined by a discourse" (1998b: 32). For now, the important point to draw from this is that the subject, as it appears in discursive reality (the symbolic order), is not the apparently centred, intentional subject but, on the contrary, a subject that is desiring and split. What follows from this is that the impulses and desires which prompt or compel actions are, to some degree, unknown and inaccessible to the subject.

The second relevant aspect of Lacan's notion of the subject is that desire (i) emanates from a lack associated with the necessity yet impossibility of identifying the subject from within the sociosymbolic order; and (ii) becomes formulated in an intimate and unconscious relation to the Other. Importing the concept of the Other to our analysis allows us to admit, but also to reinterpret, the operation and significance of `structure' in relation to intentions, desires and motives. This Other is salient in any articulation that is accomplished through language. It could be manifested by a single person (such as the mother or any other key person) but more generally the Other is conceived as that which gives consent to the subject *qua* signifier and thus makes possible the (power) relation between subjects. In this sense, the Other becomes the locus of speech through which "everything that can be articulated on the basis of the signifier comes to be inscribed" (Lacan, 1998b: 81). What follows from the centrality of the Other is that everything that is symbolically inscribed goes through the Other. This is what underpins the infamous Lacanian statement that "man's desire is the desire of the Other" and, by extension, the radical decentrement of subjectivity. It is a formulation which signals, or is symptomatic of, a movement of analysis away from approaches premised upon a conventional differentiation of agency and structure.

The third point relevant for rethinking agency is that the Other is also split. The hitch, as Lacan puts it, is that "the Other, the locus, knows nothing" (1998b: 98) in the sense that there is nothing – no 'Other of the Other' (such as a god, or a final cause) – that can guarantee a definite and stable meaning (e.g of what is desirable). The Other, however compelling, authoritative or universal it may appear, is radically contingent and therefore undependable. Given this (radical) contingency of the Other, Lacan does not simply suggest that we are reduced to discourse (as the first point above might suggest) but that the discourse itself is marked by an impossible and unsymbolisable kernel which Lacan characterises the `Real'. This point is crucial as it subverts any suggestion that subjects are subordinated to, or ciphers of, structures. As Jones and Spicer (2005: 232-3) put it "The subject never closes on the centre of the subjectivity that is imputed in discourse because it is structured around a traumatic central gap—which is what Lacan calls 'the Real'. The subject is never able fully to internalize and identify with the Other of discourse".

What follows from this assertion – that there is no 'Other of the Other' which could, beyond any doubt, guarantee a stable meaning of the social – is that there is always a space of agency that is

not merely animated by pathological impulses (Zupančič, 2000). In contrast to comparatively `centred' conceptions of subjectivity, a Lacanian approach problematizes the possibility of acting freely – that is, without pathological inclinations – even in cases where the subject `self-evidently' has, and enjoys, the freedom to act. Crucially, non-determined actions are accounted for in relation to the demands placed upon subjects in the struggle with their immanent lack and their relatedness to the lack in the Other. In turn, this leads to an exploration of the political character of social relations as attention is paid to how agents either deny or acknowledge the immanent disjunction between acting and desiring. We expand upon this understanding below but for now it suffices to underscore our claim that a distinctive benefit of adopting Lacan's notion of the subject is the provision of a critical alternative to commonsense associations of sovereignty – `free will', `choice', etc. - that routinely accompany the term `agency'.

Poles of Social Analysis

The appeal of a Lacanian notion of the subject is that it enables us to avoid (1) a rational model of the agent, (2) a clear demarcation between agency and structure, and (3) determinism. In order to flesh out the implications of a Lacanian turn, we situate our argument in relation to three dominant `poles' of social theory. The *first*, agency-centric pole, accounts for social realities by reference to the rational and conscious strivings of individuals. These strivings are understood to have an ontological status that is independent of their construction through social relations. Rational choice theory and action theory lean in the direction of this pole which is strongly associated with methodological individualism. A *second*, structure-centric pole accounts for social realities by reference to structures and systems that are ascribed an ontological status independent of the social relations through which they are constructed. This orientation is exemplified by structuralism and systems theory and is strongly associated with methodological collectivism.

A *third* pole accounts for social realities by selectively appropriating, combining, and thereby reworking ideas developed within the orbit of the other poles. In Berger and Luckmann's (1966: 79) influential formulation, `the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one'. Our position has a stronger affinity to this pole insofar as we broadly share its rejection of agency-centric methodological individualism and structure-centric methodological collectivism. A distinctive feature is its insistence that agency and structure cannot be understood independently of each other. In Berger and Luckmann's words, `the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity' (ibid). But, accompanying and underpinning an appreciation of the interdependence of agency and structure is a resistance to rethinking their status: a positive ontology of agency and of structure is uncritically retained. Our contention is that, in Berger and Luckmann's `dialectical' approach, the stability ascribed to the individual (agency) and of society (structure) is in principle unsettled by the understanding that they are mutually implicated. Yet, any suggestion that either of them might be `split' is unexplored as the emphasis is exclusively upon appreciating how agents' actions are conditioned by structures as `the individual's biography is apprehended as an episode within the objective history of a society' (ibid: 77-8); and as structures are conceived as `externalized products of human activity' (ibid: 88). Privileged in such formulations is the idea of `agency' as distinguished

primarily by "consciousness, free will, and reflexivity" (Fuchs, 2001: 26), positive attributes which are understood to render social action intelligible. Accordingly, `agency' is invoked to claim that the (re)production of the social world depends upon the active, albeit routinised, participation of human beings endowed with a capacity to establish, preserve and transform social institutions ranging from the casual, ritualized greeting to the more calculating organization of transnational corporations. Agency, in this sense, "refers to the fact that we make culture, history, and policy" (Musolf, 2003:3). The emphasis is upon how social worlds are created and changed by the agential power of human beings possessed of `free will'. Central to this capability, it is claimed, is engagement in a continuous process of reflexive reliance upon learning from the past and anticipating possibilities stretching into the future while addressing their connection to a fleeting but continuous present. Agency is conceived as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its "iterational" or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a "projective" capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a "practical-evaluative" capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998 : 962)

While `agency' denotes the capacity of human beings to make a difference with regard to `culture, history and policy', the concept of `structure' signals the understanding that agency is also embedded in culture, etc. in a way that constrains but also enables agents' actions.

If agency points to the ability to act, structures point to how these acts are usually formulated in relation to structures as conditions of possibility of actions. Berger and Luckmann's dialectics, or Giddens' theory of structuration, may point towards, but they do not address, the limitations associated with a positive ontology in which, for example, the irrational and obscene quality of desire is either unacknowledged or effectively domesticated. In Giddens's theory of structuration, the unconscious forms part of his stratification model of the agent (Giddens, 1979: 56 et seq; 1984: 5 et seq) but its significance is not explored in any detail or depth. Reference to unconscious sources of motivation fill out an approach in which the emphasis is upon the reflexive monitoring of action and the rationalization of action, with the relevance of the unconscious being limited to its role in the formation of a `basic security system' in which addressing ontological insecurity is conflated with the maintenance of social identity (Groarke, 2002; Willmott, 1986) and, ultimately, with a strengthening of the ego. In Lacanian terms, security is thereby equated with the reproduction of the imaginary register to which the Real can only pose a threat, rather than present a spur, to an emancipatory refusal of its confines.

The ego and the subject

Concepts such as the self, the subject, the ego, or the I are deployed in everyday talk in ways that are not well differentiated from one another. Even in social theory these terms may play a `floating' yet central role in which their appeal and potency relies upon a lack of definition. For Lacan, however, any notion of the self requires due care so that the significance of unconscious structures is not trivialized or obscured, including acts of transference. So, how does Lacan conceive of the self? He insists upon a critical distinction between the ego (as the conscious, intentional and alienated construct) that is located in the imaginary register and the subject (as

the unconscious, unintentional construct that appears in the Other's discourse) (see: Fink, 1995: 7) which is located in the symbolic register, and where the subject is ascribed a more important position than that of the ego, as sketched above. This hierarchical division between the ego on the one hand, and the subject on the other, invites some further elaboration.

As we have emphasised above, the Lacanian subject is not the "individual" or the conscious subject of Anglo-American Philosophy (see: Fink, 1995: 36-37). Throughout his career Lacan argued fervently against any interpretation of Freud that assumed or anticipated a conflict-free zone within the ego (see: Macey, 1988: 107-8). This stance positions Lacan against the tradition of ego-psychology (with representatives such as Heinz Hartmann, Ernest Kris and Rudolph Lowenstein) in which the focus is "on the way the ego neutralizes instinctual drives and the strength of the id, harnesses them and uses them to further the work of adaptation. According to ego-psychologists, the aim of analysis is to strengthen the ego. The analysis is seen as a process whereby the patient, the analysand, comes to identify with the strong ego of the analyst. "(Sarup, 1992: 39). To Lacan, the therapeutic ambition of constructing a strong ego that can domesticate the id at once depends upon and contributes towards an obscuring of the more 'radical' insights of Freud:

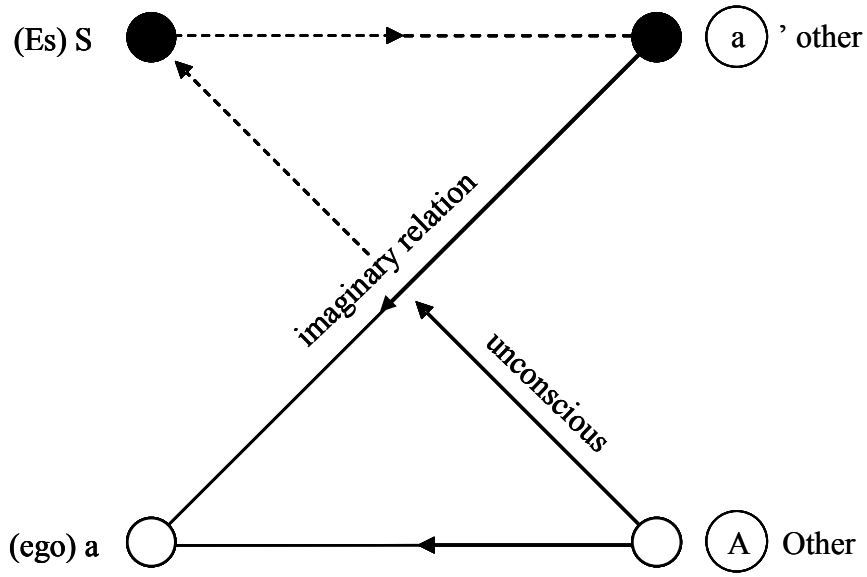
> [P]sychoanalysis in the United States has been inflicted toward the adaptation of the individual to the social environment, the search for behaviour patterns, and all the objectification implied in the notion of 'human relations'. And the indigenous term, "human engineering", strongly implies a privileged position of exclusion with respect to the human object (Lacan ,2006: 38).

For Lacan, the task of strengthening the ego is not an appropriate task of psychoanalysis. On the contrary, the attempt to reinforce the ego is seen to run the risk of inducing or encouraging narcissism so that the analysand's ego "becomes alienated from himself, transforming himself into the counterpart" (Evans, 1996: 51). In this alienation, the analysand may gain a certain satisfaction from identifying and observing his or her ego *qua* specular image, but that this act can only be made at a distance (hence, alienation) insofar as the ego is detached from what it conceives itself to represent. There is, so to speak, "the illusion of autonomy, but it is only an illusion, and the subject moves from fragmentation and insufficiency to illusory unity" (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 56; see also Knights and Willmott, 2002).

From these brief remarks, it can be appreciated that Lacan made a critical distinction between the ego and the subject (see figure 1). "The ego has a reference to the [small] other. It is its correlative." (Lacan, 1991a: 50). The small other here is entirely inscribed into the imaginary order and is, peculiarly enough, "not really other, but a reflection and projection of the ego". (Evans, 1996: 132-3). The subject, in contrast, belongs to the symbolic and is, as we have already noted, bound up with the big Other. The ego-subject distinction provides a basic orientation to Lacan's view of subjectivity. Crucially, it indicates how, for Lacan, the subject is always the appropriate category of analysis whereas the ego "emanates from… the subject's impotence" (Lacan, 1991a: 50). The ego stands for how the subject, in the confrontation with its own lack, resorts to an imaginary construct of completeness – for example, by refurbishing what Giddens

(1979; 1984) identifies as the `basic security system'. In this sense, the "*ego* makes itself manifest… as defence, as refusal" (Lacan, 1991a: 53). It is an unwillingness to come to terms with what, according to Lacan, are the real conditions of existence that are predicated on the intimate relation of the subject to the Other. In short, then, as noted earlier, the "ego belongs to the imaginary order, whilst the subject belongs to the symbolic" (Verhaeghe, 1998: 164).

Figure 1: Schema L (Lacan, 2006: 40)



Lacan's subject-ego distinction is suggestive of how human beings are engaged in a continuous process of identifying with an imaginary specular image, or with a position within the symbolic. The imaginary identification pertains to the ego and its relation to the small other. The symbolic identification, on the other hand, points to the subject's dependency on the big Other. The former mode of identification forces the ego to "alienate himself – put his identity outside himself, so to speak, into the image of his double" (Žižek, 1989: 104). In contrast, symbolic identification provides the necessary ground for agential power. We can see, already at this early juncture, that it is the Lacanian subject, as a sociosymbolic entity, that has the mandate to engage and act. The ego, on the other hand, is a misrecognition [méconnaisance] of ones own symbolic mandate. This is not to say that the ego does not exercise any sociosymbolic power but, rather, that the ego proceeds on the basis of an exaggeration, romanticization or aggrandisement of his or her (sovereign) position or role in this process.

Che Voui?

If we accept that the symbolic subject, rather than the imaginary ego, is the appropriate category for understanding what is conventionally conceived as the agential dimension of subjectivity, we encounter a tricky set of questions. First, given that "a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier" (Lacan, 1998a: 207) and that this signifier is gained only through the intervention of the Other, we cannot, with any certainty, know whether the signifier, which allows the subject to act, belongs to the subject or the Other. The second question that emerges is that *if* we accept that the Other is the necessary means for gaining access to socio-political reality,

how then can we trust the Other? How can we know that the act of submitting ourselves to the Other will produce the desired result?

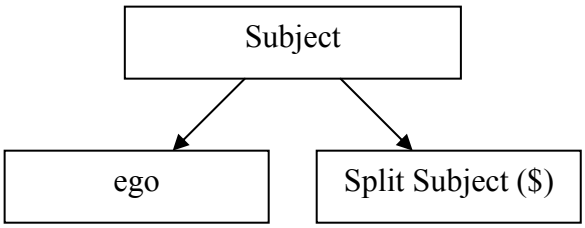
These questions indicate that in the process of becoming a subject, in receiving a symbolic mandate, an inescapable uncertainty is encountered by the subject. In the process of gaining this mandate (or signifier) - that is to say, in the process of interpellation (see Žižek 1989; Althusser, 1971) - the subject cannot be quite sure as to why s/he had to assume *this* particular mandate (or signifier). In fact, the response from the subject is always: this is not it! The subject can never be fully confident in that this role – the specific position that has been given to him or her within the symbolic terrain – is the role s/he *should* carry. This uneasiness is manifest in the (hysterical) question of *Che Vuoi?* that is directed towards the Other: "You're telling me that, but what do you want with it, what are you aiming at?' (Žižek, 1989: 111). The obscure(d) aim of the Other is the source of an irreducible distrust between the subject and the Other. What this amounts to, then, is that a symbolic identification, in contrast to an imaginary, corresponds to the role or position that the subject enjoys, but this position, precisely because it is instantiated through the mediation of the Other, cannot be regarded as the position that oneself, through ones own free will, chose. There will always be an element of uncertainty with regard to the perennial question of who made the definitive choice. Consider, for example, the motives that trigger a young boy to participate in ice hockey (rather than any other activity). This choice may appear to correspond well with the child's own will, yet it is always impossible to exclude other alternatives. It may be the case that the decision is (un)consciously negotiated in relation to the inclinations of his friends; or it might be explained in relation to the secret desire of the father who wants his son to become a professional hockey player to compensate for his own disappointed ambitions to be successful in the sport. What this amounts to is not necessarily that the subject's intention is being manipulated by someone else, but the rather different assertion that desire is bound up with the Other.

But why does Lacan stress the complexities of the relation between the subject and the Other? Or, to frame this question within the agency-structure debate: why can the agent never trust its position vis-à-vis the structures that surrounds it, why can I never positively know that it was me, *qua* agent, and not me, *qua* bearer of a structure, that decided upon the undertaken act? The answer to this question is twofold. First, and to repeat '*man's desire is the desire of the Other'* (e.g. Lacan, 1998a: 115). For Lacan, "the Other is an other that I have so thoroughly incorporated that I am unable to distinguish it from my sense of self" (Kaufman, 2002: 139). Because of this intimate relation, there can be no final guarantee that what the subject believes himself to desire is not what, in actual fact, the Other desires. A second explanation of why the subject may find it difficult to feel comfortable in his sociosymbolic role is that the Other does not hold the final answer. One could say that the structure is itself incomplete. Every structure is always already dislocated; it is, so to speak, contingent all the way down (see Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 47). The corollary to this assertion is that the subject is not pre-destined in any way. The structure, though irreducible to an external category, is itself dislocated, incomplete and does not in any determinate way chose or act through the subject.

The Split Subject ($)

Our identification of the subject and the ego presupposes the presence of a third, `split (or barred) subject'. This presupposition becomes articulated in Lacan's later work where, from the publication of *Seminar XI* onwards, he elaborates not only the split between the ego and the subject but also the internal split of the subject (Nobus, 1998: 165). The internal split can be conceptualised in a variety of ways but one aspect that is central to all conceptualizations is how the subject becomes split through language: it becomes divided between the subject of enunciation, on the one hand, and the subject of the statement, on the other. The split subject ($) acknowledges its fragile and contingent status vis-à-vis the Other. But in our definition, the split subject does not only denote its own internal split but, more importantly, confronts the radical contingency and irreducible lack of the Other. It sacrifices, so to speak, the Other *qua* external guarantor, as the fantasmatic support. As Joan Copjec remarks, "[i]t is the loss of these supports that causes the fracturing of the surface order of appearance, a splitting within being and not between being and its beyond" (2002: 37). The subject that fails to acknowledge this contingency, on the other hand, is the ego. We can relate these arguments to the following schema:

Figure 2.



The upper side of this diagram shows how the subject is the starting point for Lacan. Perhaps paradoxically, this subject is always already split but may be more or less in denial of this splitness. The already-split subject is to be understood against the background of language through which the subject entered into the symbolic and, in doing so, limited access to what preceded this entry. This loss is, thus, nothing but a presupposed loss. As Lacan notes: "since it is a matter of finding it again, we might just as well characterize this object as a lost object. But although it is essentially a question of finding it again, the object indeed has never been lost" (1992: 58). To return to the diagram, the subject is not a full, pre-linguistic object. Rather, the subject is understood to be conditioned by the Other and is represented in the symbolic through a signifier. Operating in a symbolic register, the subject is obliged to articulate either an imaginary response (through the ego) or an ethical stance (through the split subject). The subject confronts its condition of possibility by acknowledging itself as split (subject) or as complete (ego). An implication of this schema is that if the subject does not live *qua* split subject, s/he ceases to be a subject (Zupančič, 2000: 31). For the ego's imaginary response to the encounter with the Other can result only in a pathological choice in which only no freedom or unbounded agency is thinkable.

We are now in a position to summarize some key features of Lacan's conceptualization of the subject.

Toward a Lacanian typology of agency

Having outlined some key features of the Lacanian subject, we now elaborate upon how Lacan's thinking is suggestive of alternative ways of conceiving of `agency'. Of particular importance in our proposed typology of agency is the agent's relation to its motivational ground - that is, desire.

Table 1.

	Description	Agent	Impetus	Register
Symbolic agency	Degree of influence or power in relation to a specific situation and context	Subject	Desire of the Other	Symbolic
Imaginary agency	A response that overemphasizes the agent's own potency and agency. Always misrecognizing itself	Ego	Alienated desire	Imaginary
Ethical agency	An act that does not draw support from symbolic or imaginary constructs	Split subject	Drive	Real

Symbolic Agency

The first version of agency we call `symbolic' as it corresponds to the subject conditioned by the Other. When articulating this form of agency, the subject acts and engages on a socio-political arena and as such is equipped with a certain mandate to do things. The subject is located in social space which enables him or her to do things differently and negotiate positions. The space may be comparatively broad or narrow. Consider, for example, the differences between the space made available to a manager of a call-centre and that of call-centre worker. We can say that the manager has greater influence over a number of relevant processes of the organization, including recruitment and promotion. However, the attribution of agency to managers does not mean that their actions necessarily correspond to their desires. Following Lacan, all actions that correspond to the subject are inscribed in an unconscious relation to the Other. In other words, the subject is fully capable of engaging socially (e.g. as a manager) but there is a certain disjunction between desire and those acts that s/he undertakes. One could say that the subject is somewhat virtual in that s/he does not have access to how desires and associated intentions are constructed in relation to the Other. To illustrate this *virtual* dimension of the agent, consider Žižek example of *The Virtual Boss*:

In one of the recent 'corporate nightmare' thrillers, *The Virtual Boss*, a company is actually (and unbeknownst to the employees) run by a computer that suddenly 'runs amok', grows beyond control and starts to implement measures against the top managers (it instigates conflicts among

them, gives orders for them to be fired, etc.); finally, it sets in motion a deadly plot against its own programmer…. The 'truth' of this plot is that a Master is, in a sense, always virtual – a contingent person who fills out a preordained place in the structure, while the game is actually run by the 'big Other' *qua* impersonal symbolic machine. This is what a Master is forced to take note of via the experience of 'subjective destitution': that he is by definition an impostor, an imbecile who misperceives as the outcome of his decisions what actually ensues from the automatic run of the symbolic machine. (Žižek, 1994: 169-70)

This example shows how the big Other '*qua* impersonal symbolic machine' is always present in social situations. Even though the example may be apocryphal, it shows that managers, or other employees for that matter, are subjected to a symbolic structure. It also shows how the subject is somewhat subordinated to the situation in which s/he acts. The subject is always virtual in that s/he can only accept his or her agency if s/he first accepts (but simultaneously denies) a position in social space as a manager, etc..

Imaginary agency

One way of appreciating how desire is always bound up with the desire of the Other is by recognising how it may be denied – for example, by extinguishing such unseemly awareness with fantasmatic scenarios so as to maintain, or return to, a normalized state. This response is what we call imaginary agency. The imaginary agent, or the ego, denies both its own split and the contingency of the Other. It becomes, so to speak, "complicit in covering over the radical contingency of social relations by identifying with a particular discourse. In this sense … [the imaginary agent] *misrecognizes* its real conditions of existence." (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 175). In the example of the computer taking over the leadership of a company, the imaginary agent might, for example, respond by taking credit for, and celebrating, what s/he believes to be the fruit of his or her own actions, but which is the work of a computer. The ego sees itself as an image of unity that is in control.

It is important to recognise how the imaginary register is always coupled to the symbolic register. This means that even though the imaginary agent misrecognizes its position it may nevertheless enjoy being a symbolic subject. On the other hand, what distinguishes the imaginary agent from the ethical agent (see below) is that the former fails to accept that the agency granted through his sociosymbolic mandate (through the Other) is contingent as it depends on a number of conditions. Denying this contingency, the imaginary agent misrecognizes his or her position in relation to the Other.

Ethical Agency

An alternative way of relating to the Other and symbolic agency is by accepting, first, that one's desire is bound up with the desire of the Other and, secondly, that the Other is radically contingent. This response we call *ethical agency*. While the concept of the ethical may resonate with ideas of "proper conduct" or "morals", we are not making this association here. Instead, when speaking of the ethical, we are referring to its formulation in Lacan and in the work of a number of influential commentators (e.g. Slavoj Žižek, 1998; Alenka Zupančič, 2000; Joan

Copjec, 2002; and Alain Badiou, 2001) where the ethical belongs to the category of the Real: to that site of human experience which by definition resists symbolization. This conception of the Ethical requires a few words of clarification.

In 1959-60, the year of *Seminar VII*, Lacan began to develop his ideas around ethics by illustrating his arguments in relation to Sophocles' play Antigone (see Lacan, 1992). This tragedy, which has been significant for many commentators before Lacan (e.g. Hegel), places the heroic act of Antigone at the centre. The general plot of the play proceeds as follows: as a consequence of Antigone's brother, Polynicies, his opposition to the state has denied a proper burial. The punishment for disobeying this decree is death. However, Antigone is not intimidated by these threats and decides to pursue her ethical trajectory by burying her brother. In Lacan's reading of this play, Antigone becomes the epitome of the Ethical subject in that she does not compromise on her desire, even when her act is closely associated with her own death. In other words, she gives precedence to *her*, as opposed to the Other's, desire. By refusing to comply with the rule of the state, Antigone becomes an outsider who is not reducible to the bearer of a symbolic structure. In Lacan's words: "in the end tragic heroes are always isolated, they are always beyond established limits, always in an exposed position and, as a result, separated in one way or another from the structure" (Lacan, 1992: 271).

This formulation of ethics has attracted a good deal of suspicion. Stavrakakis, for example, asks whether Antigone's response could be conceived as "a mode of ethico-political action" and he suggests that "[t]he "suicidal heroic ethics" implicit in Lacan's reading of Antigone implies a total neglect of the socio-political world" (Stavrakakis, 2005: 173). Russel Grigg goes even further in his critique, claiming that Antigone's behaviour, if removed from Sophocles tragedy and, instead, placed within 'real' life, would be seen "as the epitome of manic hysterical behaviour" (Grigg, 2005:191). In the aftermath of *Seminar VII* Lacan himself became increasingly suspicious of the possibility of a *pure* desire so that, in his later teaching (from *Seminar XI* onwards), he questions the coherence of placing desire at the centre of his analysis of the Ethical. The main thrust for jettisoning this concept is a shift in Lacan's understanding of desire which he comes to regard as "a defence, a defence against going beyond a limit in jouissance" (Lacan, 2006:699). This defence mechanism could be explained in relation to a clarified view that "[d]esire is produced not as a striving for something but only as a striving for something else or something more" (Copjec, 1994: 55). In this sense, desire sustains itself by recurrently preventing (through the importation of the Law) access to what it seeks. It follows then that desire hinges upon the Law to the extent that the Law, in Lacan's formulation, "originates in desire" (Lacan, 2006: 700).

Turning away from the notion of pure desire, Lacan redirected his attention by reference to the concept of the drive. The difference between these two concepts could explicated through consideration of their respective relation to *aim* and *satisfaction.* Desire aims at 'something more' or 'something else' that is valued, or desired, for its anticipated reproduction of the subject, including its desire. In contrast, instead of reproducing and reinforcing the cause of desire, the drive is productive of satisfaction without an aim. This means that "the drive may be satisfied without attaining what… would be the satisfaction of its end of reproduction" (Lacan, 1998a:

179). Although there is an important distinction between the desire and the drive, the latter can only be understood by reference to the former. As Zupančič notes, "[i]n order to arrive at the drive, one must pass through desire and insist on it until the very end" (2000: 239). This means that the subject must first understand the fundamental fantasies that link him or her to the Other in order to pass through, or traverse, the fantasy. Only then can we begin to speak of a subject of the drive. A final, related point is that the subject of the drive is a "headless subject" (Lacan, 1998a: 181): "the object of the drive is to be situated at the level of what I have metaphorically called a headless subjectification, a subjectification without subject, a bone, a structure, an outline" (Lacan, 1998a: 184). This means that the drive does not have a subject as such. Rather, the drive is conceived as "what becomes of the demand when the subject vanishes from it" (Lacan, 2006: 692).

To render these arguments somewhat more accessible we should understand them against the background of the Real, that is, as something that "happens to us (we encounter it) as *impossible*: 'the impossible thing' that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this [socio-symbolic] universe" (Zupančič, 2000: 234). In effect, the Real is felt as the punching of a hole through the symbolic register but, more credibly, it is a reminder of the emptiness – the negative ontology – that precedes the formation of the symbolic register. It is in this light that we may understand that "the Real… *does not have a subject*… but is essentially a by-product of the action (or inaction) of the subject… In other words, 'there is no hero of the Event [the Real]" (Zupančič, 2000: 238).

To conclude this section, then, we may state that while ethical agency is possible as a radical act that subverts the socio-symbolic universe, it should not, ultimately, be conceived as the act of a (desiring) subject. This does not mean that the subject is excluded or innocent of radical changes but, more modestly, that the subject's inclination never perfectly coincides with the Real. Another point which is relevant in this context is that these (Lacanian) arguments do not so much point to the subject's inability to carry out an act – which, at worst, could be interpreted as a pretext for passivity – as it points to the paradoxical relation between an act and the agent's inclinations. Accordingly, we conceive of the split subject - as the subject that lives out the lack in the Other - as key to understanding the ethical. This is not to suggest, of course, that the split subject by definition is ethical but simply that the split subject confronts the lack in the Other in such a way that makes ethical agency possible.

Implications

Having developed a typology of agency that incorporates the notion of desire, we wish to flesh out some of the implications that follow from this analysis. We position our arguments in relation to two fields: social analysis and critical management studies.

Social analysis

In sociological accounts, where the accent tends to be on the shaping of the `individual' by `society', attention is nonetheless paid to `agency' in order to account for how social relations are reproduced as well as transformed through the consciousness of actors that is conceived to be

irreducible either to biological inheritance or environmental determinism. As we suggested earlier, however, the notion of agency is routinely founded upon the idea of an autonomous individual that emphasises a capacity to exercise discretion and choice to the comparative neglect of the agent's inclinations – its pathologies, desires, alienations and so on. This neglect, which in our view calls for radical correction and exploration, is rarely acknowledged and therefore receives little serious or sustained attention. For example, in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998: 974) heavily cited article on agency where a passing recognition of the relevance of desire and the importance of ontology is followed by a disinclination to explore their significance:

We cannot begin to explore here the ontology of the self or the full implications for agency of such categories as "desire" (although see Lacan 1977).

In our view, it is precisely the question of ontology and desire which requires consideration in order to arrive at a notion of agency that takes seriously the inclinations for action. Our venture in this direction has been modest: we have merely outlined a typology of agency which requires further elaboration and application but which nonetheless, has some significant implications for social analysis.

The first implication following from a Lacanian reconstruction of `agency' is that it cannot be assumed to belong to the `individual'. By this, we do not mean to say that acts are not undertaken by `individuals' but, rather, that subjects are already located within a complex net of symbolic relations that precede any action. Attentiveness to this 'situatedness' resonates *inter alia* with a symbolic interactionist understanding of the identification of the `I' in relation to the `Me' and the `Generalized Other' but, in Mead's(1934?) social behaviourism, the `I' is conceived as a given which is comparatively unified or centred: there is no ambition to include desire, let alone consideration of ontology. In contrast to analysis that points to the structuring of human action, including the capacity of self-direction through processes of socialization, a Lacanian conception of `agency' problematizes the idea of social structures enabling or constraining putatively autonomous actors as attention is directed to the nature and influence of desire in conditioning action.

The second important point pertains to ontology. The understanding of `agency' explored in this paper is informed by a negative ontology which does not presume identities to be given by their positive features. Structuralism and, in particular, the pathbreaking ideas of Saussure in which the relational character of all identities is conjectured, provides a starting point. However, this is only an initial building block for Lacanian analysis. The second crucial point is that any identity, though relational in its character, is related to a lack. In this sense, the ontological condition for any form of subjectivity is predicated on "the lack of being properly speaking" (Lacan, 1991a: 223). Crucially in relation to this lack, which is another way of saying that the subject is split, is that "desire is a relation of being to lack" (ibid.). Adopting a negative ontology allows us to appreciate not only the impossibility inherent in the social (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), but also to understand how this essential lack, this unbridgeable kernel which resists symbolization, *becomes the structuring principle for social relations*. Lack is what compels social organization

through the latter's responsiveness to desire which is itself the desire of the Other. What follows from these assertions is that any identity is always already dislocated. At best, identity is caught up in the symbolic register and, at worst, spins around in the imaginary register. It means that a stable and final identity is, by definition, impossible to attain. Following Lacan, it is more consistent to refer to processes of identification as this better conveys the continual search for something essentially impossible (see Glynos, 1999).

Together, these points suggest a basis for reconstructing social analysis in a way that provides an alternative formulation of the coupling of processes of social reproduction and transformation with the desires of human beings. This move radically challenges the alienation of subjects (e.g. `individuals) and objects (e.g. `societies) that has become institutionalized within, and legitimised through, social science. Notably, it becomes much more difficult to attribute social and environmental problems to `structures' that somehow exist beyond, or outside of, `agents'. Equally, it becomes more difficult to anticipate radical change – which does not simply substitute the dominance of one imaginary register for another – without a shift in social relations that actively values and facilitates ethical agency. This understanding, to be clear, goes beyond simply arguing that structure is a medium and outcome of agency as it explores the depth of the implication of the desire of agents in the reproduction and transformation of social relations. Ultimately, problems are diagnosed in terms of our struggles with our desires but not in a way that individualizes these problems - as we have stressed by highlighting the significance of the desire of the Other.

It should now be clear that our objection to established forms of social analysis – such as Giddens' theory of structuration, or Bourdieu's disposition of the habitus – does not concern an agency-centric denial of how structures constrain or create opportunities for action. Instead, our objection is to their neglect of the relation between the agents' desires and the accomplishing of action such that the presence and significance of the register of the Real is ignored, denied or obscured. If social analysis is to address this relation, more potent theories of human subjectivity must be engaged. Our typology offers a possible mode of engagement by foregrounding concepts such as desire, decentrement, unconscious, fantasy and enjoyment as driving forces behind human action.

Critical Management Studies

Mainstream study of management has generally been unreceptive to poststructuralist thinking, including Lacan's reconstruction of Freudian psychoanalysis, as it unsettles commonsense thinking and is perceived to lack relevance for legitimising management practice. In contrast, forms of critical management studies – from Baritz's `Servants of Power' to contemporary analysis of climate change – have been far less preoccupied with prescribing for, or legitimising, business than with addressing *inter alia* the role of powerful corporations in the reproduction of relations of domination and exploitation locally and globally. A variety of critical perspectives – Marxism, radical Weberianism, critical hermeneutics, etc. – have been adapted to the critique of business and management; but, prior to the advent of poststructuralism, such approaches have tended to assume a centred subject, to discount the insights of psychoanalysis and, at best, to

incorporate some insights from ego psychology (e.g. Stein, 2003; Psychoanalytic Thought and the Critical Management Project, 2005). As Jones and Spicer (2003: 98) have observed,

`Lacan is typically given only passing mention in works that survey organization studies (Clegg et al.,1996: 235–6; Jackson and Carter, 2000; Warwick Organizational Behaviour Staff, 2001: 621) and fails to attract the attention of those outlining 'critical' approaches to management and organization (see, for example, Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Thompson and McHugh, 2002; Wilson, 1999). Lacan has been almost totally sidestepped in debates over postmodernism and organization, not being mentioned in the contributions to this debate by Burrell (1988, 1994), Cooper (1989), Cooper and Burrell (1988), Hancock and Tyler (2001b), Hassard and Parker (1993) or Parker (1992)'

In recent years a number of contributions that take up the insights of Lacan have appeared in organization studies (e.g. Contu and Willmott, 2006; De Cock and Böhm, 2007; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005,). This is a promising development but it can also obscure the extent to which Lacan't thinking has been ignored – as evident, for example, in the absence of reference to his thinking in Calas and Smircich's `Past Postmodernism' where numerous poststructuralist texts are mentioned but without consideration of the relevance of psychoanalytic theory[1]. Our purpose here has been to explicate in a systematic manner what we regard as some of the more central elements of Lacan's thinking. This invites critique and further refinement that can be of benefit to future applications of his thinking in our field. To stimulate this process, we briefly illustrate our argument in relation to two issues - emancipation and resistance – which have acquired a central position within the discourse of CMS.

Although the concept of emancipation has been critically revised and problematized in relation to poststructuralist thought, it continues to enjoy a prominent and relatively untheorized position within CMS even where `grand' projects of emancipation have been complemented and, to a degree, replaced by notions of micro-emancipation (see Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; 2002; see also Zannoni and Janssens, 2007) . In a similar vein, resistance has gone through a conceptual metamorphosis. From being conceived as a visible and forceful method of objecting and repudiating management practices, it is increasingly represented as a complex, tricky phenomenon that, at worst, operates to reinforce and reproduce those structures that it ostensibly contests (see: Contu, forthcoming; Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

The theoretical trajectory of these two conceptual terms is similar insofar as the self-evidence, if not the authenticity, of resistance and emancipation have been subjected to critical scrutiny. In Fleming and Sturdy (1996), for example, the injunction to be yourself, or to be different, is conceived as a prolongation of normative control. Instead of perceiving the opportunity for 'being yourself' as a form of empowerment or emancipation, it is argued that a consequence of the encouragement to allow one's true, private, self to `come out' in the workplace – that is, to be different and provocative – is an ensnaring of the subject and reduction of spaces for resistance. A

[1] There is a passing reference to Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* but only in relation to queer theory.

parallel analysis is offered by Contu (2007) where she argues that resistance is rarely coupled with a radical investment that risks subverting and dislocating the social order. Instead, resistance is governed by the lure of a construct of 'autonomy' and 'agency' regulated by fantasies operating in the imaginary register. The example is particularly suggestive with regard to the operation of cynical workplaces of late capitalism where the denial of the Other, as piss taking or secretly farting, runs counter to a 'real' resistance. Such studies are indicative of the paradoxical nature of subjectivity as they explore how the idea of 'opposing' or 'rebelling' may be part and parcel of the reproduction of established power relations. In this respect, they illuminate some of the central aspects of Lacan's thinking, especially with regard to the imaginary register, that we have endeavoured to distil in our explication of his key ideas. More specifically, these studies point to the lure of assuming an imaginary construction which allows the subject to feel autonomous and self-empowered. In turn, this insight is suggestive of deeply engrained processes that facilitate, indeed compel, the reproduction of established relations of domination but also the possibility of ethical agency which is resistant to deriving support from symbolic or imaginary constructs, and thereby pointing towards an alternative conceptualization of the relationship of `agency' to `structure'.

Conclusion

We have suggested that in order to come to terms with the inclinations that underpin action, we may benefit from the work of Lacan. More specifically, we have developed a typology of agency based on Lacan's three registers: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the Real. In the symbolic order (which is unavoidably marked by the interruption of the Real and the overlap of the imaginary) the subject is given a symbolic mandate to act. This means that a subject is always equipped with an agential power to do things. However, the desire that underpins any action is, by definition, given by the intervention of the Other. In this sense, the subject may never be fully convinced that it is his or her own wish that is at stake. The second form of agency operates within an imaginary register where the subject is licenced to deny that s/he is not in full control over its own intentions. The third, ethical form of agency is articulated in the register of the Real where, in contrast to imaginary agency, it is possible not only to accept and understand but also to enact the radical contingency of the social as well as the splitness of itself. Agency conceived in relation to the real is undoubtedly a difficult theoretical construct which calls for more elaboration. However, in carving out a space for thinking of agency in relation to the ethical and the Lacanian real, we begin to understand the limits of thinking about agency as a self-evident and unproblematic notion.

A consideration of Lacanian insights prompts a revisiting of assumptions, manifest in variants of the agency-structure template upon which so much contemporary social analysis is founded. A Lacanian intervention, founded in a negative ontology, may help to reactivate the paradoxical, emotional and pathological dimensions of human subjectivity. It hints at how 'freedom' and 'emancipation' may be sensed in the most awkward moments and how a sense of liberty is perversely confined within an imaginary construction. For it demonstrates how the reproduction of domination involves a libidinal economy of enjoyment. In the register of the imaginary, we find elusive reassurance through exaggeration of our potency and agency. Ethical agency serves to

dispel or `traverse' this fantasy through a refusal of the formation which domesticates – regulates, legislates – enjoyment.

In conclusion, it is relevant to acknowledge that, in common with other versions of radicalism, Lacanian thinking presents a number of potential pitfalls as well as challenges. Indeed, the assumption that ethical agency is at all possible may attract some suspicion. One may never be fully certain that the ethical agency, informed by the drive rather than desire, is distinct from the imaginary. In contemplating the conditions of possibility of ethical agency we note at least two salient fallacies. First, simply to acknowledge the lack in the Other, or to fully subscribe to the radical contingency underlying all social relations, may lead to "the celebration of failure: to the idea that every act ultimately misfires, and that the proper ethical stance is heroically to accept this failure" (Žižek, 2002: xii). The second pitfall is that any attempt to provide a telling example of what ethical agency may be – that is, to give content to an ethical act which is not subsumed by the Other's desire – risks confusing or conflating the ethical with the imaginary. Several commentators have noted how Lacan's own example of the heroic act (that is, when Antigone ignores the threats of Creon and goes along with her own desire, in contrast to the desire of the Other, to bury her brother Polynices) can be read as celebrating the outlaw as an iconic, imaginary notion. The same may be said of the contemporary whistle-blower. Conversely, there is a danger of romanticising acts as `ethical' that, arguably, are more plausibly located in the registers of the imaginary or the symbolic. Yet, despite the difficulties that follow from identifying the pure, ethical act , the category is valuable in pointing to the possibility of an act that is comparatively, if not wholly, released from the registers of the symbolic and the imaginary. A major challenge presented by Lacanian thinking is to work out how Lacan's thinking can be applied in the development of critical analysis of social processes, including organizing and managing. This requires consideration of the implications of an alternative conception of agency, based upon a negative ontology, for studying and transforming the dynamics of institutionalization including, for example, what have been characterized as `labour processes' (see, for example, Contu and Willmott, 2006). How, for example, might acts, including the effects, of whistle-blowing[2] be illuminated by mobilising Lacanian thinking?

[2] For a discussion of some of the whistle-blowing literature that mobilises ideas from Laclau but not directly from Lacan, see Edward and Willmott (2007).

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