

# Lacan's Answer to Alienation: Separation

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**Abstract:** Lacan's pivotal processes in the 'advent of the subject', i.e. alienation and separation, are discussed from an ontological point of view. For Lacan, alienation is inevitable, (there is no original identity) and structurally incomplete. Separation offers an escape from a total determination of the subject by the Other via an identification with the 'sinthome'. I argue that the body may present us with a criterion for the quality of that solution.

**Keywords:** Lacan, social theory, alienation, separation, subject, essentialism, constructivism, determinism, sinthome

During a psychoanalytical therapy, remarks such as 'I am fake', 'This is not me', 'I am not true to myself' or even 'I am an impostor' express a feeling of alienation. The original concept goes back to Rousseau (the noble savage who lost his innocence because of civilization), although it is usually associated with Marx (the proletarian saddled with a false consciousness because of capitalism). Ever since the Frankfurt school, alienation has become a central concept in critical theory. Marcuse presented a psychoanalytic reading on this notion, combining Marx with Freud.

A common theme in these different theories is that alienation is the negative result of a dominant social-cultural-economical discourse.<sup>1</sup> It allows for a social-diagnostic reasoning, echoing the original denomination for mental derangement (alienation) treated by an 'alienist'. An important exception is Hegel, who was convinced that his contemporaries were alienated because they were split from their world and failed to understand how it could be their home; his philosophical project was to overcome alienation by reconciliation with the modern social world.<sup>2</sup>

What is probably less known is that, alienation is a pivotal concept for Lacan as well. Before going into his theory, I introduce the concept in its commonly accepted version and conclude by addressing the originality of Lacan's approach.

### **Alienation as an ontological nightmare**

The question 'Who am I?' is a popular version of a central issue in ontology: is there an essential kernel to human identity? Indeed, the question itself expresses suspicion, even a certain kind of anxiety: maybe I am not the person that I could have become. There is a difference between who I am now, and who I essentially am in the kernel of my

<sup>1</sup> For the reader who wants to refresh his knowledge about alienation, the article by D. Leopold (2018) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the article on authenticity by S. Varga and Ch. Guignon (2014) will serve as a good refresher. The book by R. Jaeggi (2014), *Alienation*, brings an original contemporary reading.

<sup>2</sup> See Hardimon, M. (1992). *The project of reconciliation: Hegel's social philosophy*.

being; or between who I am now, and who I could have become. The suspicion is that all the good things I could have become, were thwarted, or twisted by society in general and particularly by my parents. In a poem by Philip Larkin:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn  
By fools in old-style hats and coats,  
Who half the time were sippy-stern  
And half at one another's throats.

The less poetic denomination is alienation, as the opposite of authenticity: I am not truly myself and this lack of authenticity is a result of bad influences. Closer scrutiny of this simple ontological reasoning leads to more complex ideas and questions.

The initial examples ('I am fake') demonstrate how a person is painfully conscious of his alienation – 'This is not me'. Most theories accept the idea that many people are alienated without being aware of it. In that case, it is decided for them that they are alienated from their supposedly true self without being conscious of it. The next step sees the one who decided about their alienation, install a system to raise their consciousness and help them get rid of their false self. Political history presents several examples of this reasoning, thus illustrating the proverb that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. What is probably less known is that the same kind of reasoning may be applied to psychodiagnostics and psychotherapy. An individual develops a mental illness because of the devastating effects of his education, as determined by the cultural and the social class (see Larkin). Psychotherapy must help patients rid themselves of their false self and to rediscover their original identity so that they can be true to themselves.

The trouble is that nobody really knows what this true self might be. Only one thing seems clear: it is much better than the actual self. Hence the moral connotation in alienation. There is good and a bad version of me; the good me is really me, the bad me is a consequence of bad influences. This confronts us with yet another difficult question: what are the criteria for deciding on a 'good' or a 'bad' me? So-called essentialist theories are never convincing, and the moral appreciation of a supposedly true self usually illustrates the power of the dominant discourse of that specific time and place.

Often enough, the intellectual and political discussions about alienation tend to overlook something that might be the only essence in

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our identity, i.e. our inner division and the ensuing double relationship. The relationship that I have with myself is as complex as the relationship that I may have with other people, from self-hate to self-love. This myself and its inner rapport stands in relation to the external world and to the Other. In my opinion, for us to understand alienation, the essential division of human identity is a good start.

#### *Authenticity: me, myself, and I*

Self-consciousness illustrates our inner division. When asking myself who I really am, at the same time I am asking whether I have become who I potentially am or originally was. Am I authentic, i.e. true to myself? Notice that in this reasoning, we take the existence of an essential kernel in our identity for granted. Development is to unroll what was already there, from birth onwards. This 'essentialism' stands in sharp contrast to 'constructivism', where a baby is considered as a blank slate waiting to be written upon by others. Identity comes down to a combination of roles, as presented by education and society. Change the roles, and you get a different identity.

In their extreme version, essentialism and constructivism are not accepted today; contemporary developmental psychology advocates a combination between the two. As a species and as an individual, human beings dispose of certain possibilities and potential talents, whose development is influenced by external influences, either in a negative or a positive way. Srinivasa Aaiyengar Ramanujan (1887-1920) developed his mathematical skills mostly on his own while living in India; once he worked at Cambridge, his genius took a higher flight. A child born with Downs syndrome may learn to read and write, if raised in a stimulating environment. In cases where a mathematical genius is repressed because of racist reactions, or a child with Downs syndrome is left to itself, we talk about missed opportunities. Contemporary neoliberal ideology presents a version where everybody must strive for excellence; to develop your talents is an individual responsibility and in the event of failure, blame is on yourself.

This kind of reasoning is loosely based on Aristotelean teleology: every living organism aims at realizing itself as optimal as possible. If self-realization is thwarted, the result is a lesser version of myself. Unnoticed, we face here the same problem as in case of essentialism. This is even more the case because ever since Darwin, science has discarded teleology. When an individual does his best to excel, to realize his talents in the best possible way, then this is already an effect of his culture and his education telling him which talents are important (contemporary version: those that lead to financial success) and endowing him with the idea that he has to rise 'above himself'. In other words, such an ideal 'self'-realization might be a perfect example of contemporary alienation, where authenticity is used as a marketing gimmick. This brings us to the relation between me and the Other.

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### *Alienation: me and the Other*

That the interaction between 'nature' and 'nurture' determines our development is widely accepted. The combined effect between hereditary elements and the environment finds a humorous illustration in an *East of Eden* dialogue (J.Steinbeck).

'You can't make a race horse of a pig'. "No, but you can make a very fast pig." The relation between me and the external world is central in the study of alienation. Often, the concept indicates the negative influence of the outside world on the development of an individual, whereby different authors identify different sources of alienation. Modern urbanized civilization for Rousseau, religion according to Feuerbach, capitalism for Marx. The common denominator is that the individual is saddled with an identity which is not truly his own. Alienation belongs to the age-old strand of cultural pessimism.

Independent of philosophy, the very same process was already described by Freud, albeit in a positive way and with a different name, i.e. identification. A baby becomes a human child because it identifies with the images and words presented by his parents and by important others in general. What these others present, is representative for the dominant culture. Lacan epitomizes both these concrete others and culture in general in his concept of the Other. Identifications are necessary, and a child that grows up outside a social context with no possibilities of identification, just does not become human. So-called feral children do not develop a normal identity.

In this reasoning, alienation might be an apt word to indicate an identification gone awry. This tallies with the contemporary attachment theory, a psychoanalytical branch of developmental psychology. Fonagy et al. (2002) describe the mirroring processes as the first identifications between infant and mother. Basically, the mother mirrors the affects that the baby experiences in its body – hungry, when hungry, angry when angry, etc. The net result is a gradual development of the 'self' – i.e. identity – combined with affect regulation. In case a parent systematically presents the wrong image, i.e. 'incongruent' mirroring – e.g. hungry when angry – the child develops an 'alien self'. The most well-known example is the borderline personality disorder.

The alien self from attachment theory illustrates the analogy between alienation on the larger social level and on the smaller developmental level. In both cases, an image is presented to a child or adult with the message: "This is you". If the presented images mirror what the child is indeed experiencing, the resulting identification is congruent. To apply the same reasoning on the social level is less easy; in that case, the identificatory models presented by the Other should mirror a supposed essence of the subject. The analogy goes even further. In case of incongruent mirroring and the resulting alien self, psychotherapy is required to correct the alien aspect. It is plausible to assume that

the same incongruent mirroring can happen on a larger scale of the social. E.g. the rising numbers of borderline personality disorder is often understood as an effect of social changes. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, it is impossible to put forward what a true or authentic core of our identity might be; just as it is impossible to conceive a therapy on the social level.

### *Alienation?*

Although it is easy to recognize, the concept of alienation presents several difficulties. Obviously, the interaction between an individual and the other/the social is necessary from birth onwards. Without such an interaction, identity does not develop. The interaction implies two sides: the organism with its limits and potentialities; the social world (the Other) that may hinder or enhance the realization of these possibilities. The question is when the influence of the Other is positive and when negative, i.e. alienating. An additional question is: alienating relative to what?

The assumption that there is an essential kernel in human identity, targeting at its realization, is impossible to prove and hard to maintain. Its weaker version – a child is born with several potentialities; ideal circumstances will promote their optimal realization – confronts us with the same problems. What are those potentialities? And who is to decide about their ethical value? If a human being is potentially an aggressive predator, it is not such a good idea to promote this quality.

Alienation is the bad version of identification, because the presented identity does not tally with a supposedly correct version – but we are at a loss when asked what this correct version might be. For a left wing intellectual, Trump-voters advocating guns, denying climate change and promoting true manhood, are alienated, based on their social background and their 'news' feed. For a right wing intellectual, liberal thinking people advocating green energy and in favor of LGBT-tolerance are alienated as a result of their elitist upbringing and their refusal to see how the world 'really' works.

The discussion about alienation becomes even more difficult when we accept the idea that an individual may be alienated without knowing it, thus suffering from a 'false consciousness'. According to Marx, the working class have identified with the social norms, value systems and social stigmas of the ruling class, as a result of which they unknowingly endorse a system that oppresses them. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, an similar false consciousness can be ascribed to liberals. In both cases, alienation is 'diagnosed' by someone belonging to the other group and the remedy may be worse than the disease – see George Orwell's *1984* where people are 're-educated'.

Even in when a person is conscious of being alienated, there is no easy solution either. Often, such a consciousness is present at the start

of a psychoanalytic therapy and – if not – the therapy itself provokes it. At that point, the analysand needs to make choices. Knowing my identity is alienated, based on images and ideas coming from the Other, offers me the possibility to make different choices. But are they really choices? The summum of alienation is an individual who tries to be free and original and therefore refuses commonly accepted beliefs. But isn't his desire to be original by itself not an alienation, based on an imposed ideal? How can we ever escape alienation at all? Thus considered, a study of alienation confronts us with the question of free choice versus determination. The same questions return in Lacan's theory as well, albeit with different accents.

### Lacan: alienation *and* separation

The notion of the 'subject' has a long history in Lacan's theory. It can be understood as his attempt to distance himself from ego psychology in general and particularly from the autonomous ego. The Lacanian subject lacks all substance and comes down to an effect of a continuing chain of signifiers – a narrative – that never reaches a final stage. The underlying 'being' is always lost, especially when it is supposed to appear in the signifiers of the Other. Just think about what I call 'the cocktail experience' – you find yourself in a company of new people, upon meeting, you have to introduce yourself. If you want to present yourself genuinely, as you *really* are, you will never find enough words. That is because the subject is condemned to a structurally determined form of never-being-there. Hence the paradoxical fact that the essence of the Lacanian subject comes down to its lacking any kind of essence whatever, and that the accent must be put on its divided character.

At the time of his paper on the mirror stage, Lacan questioned the how's and why's of identity formation.<sup>3</sup> His first theory presents us with the two sides of a dialectical process: the body and the Other. The infant is happy to find a first identificatory model in the mirror image presented to him by his (m)Other. He is happy because the identification with the mirror image and the accompanying message of the (m)Other ('Thou art that') gives him a much-needed sense of mastery over his original helplessness, the fragmented experience of his body and the push of the partial drives. The result is the first formation of the 'Je', the Ego, based on a body image presented by the other as an ideal.

Lacan considers this alienation – the concept is there – necessary for the development of a human identity. Alienation is desired against the inner chaos arising from the body, but at the same time it marks our identity as ontologically foreign, coming from the Other. In his further elaboration of the mirror stage – the "schema of the two mirrors" (Lacan, 2006c) – the accent shifts from the body and the partial drives

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<sup>3</sup> Lacan 1953; 2006a

to the Other and his desire. The desire of the Other is enigmatic for the child: "What does s/he want from me?" The answer is not obvious, and the question evokes anxiety. The result is never a satisfactory attempt to be identical with what one supposes that the Other desires, in order to master the anxiety. Again, identity is a result of our attempt to be identical with images and signifiers presented by the Other.

These ideas were elaborated further in the early sixties, with the introduction of the Real, as a third category, and with a return to the question of the body and the drive. As a category, the Real is both substantial and negative. It is a negative category by definition: the Real is what is excluded from the Symbolic because of the phallic foundation of the signifier. Hence the typical expressions: The Woman does not exist (the phallic order does not permit signifying femininity); the Other of the Other does not exist (there is no primal father founding the primal father); consequently, there is no such a thing as a sexual relationship. The Real is substantial, because it has everything to do with the real thing, meaning the drive and jouissance. To mark the difference with the body from the mirror stage and its image, Lacan talks about the organism.

Notwithstanding the normalizing impact of the mirror stage on the partial drives, an important aspect of the drive remains beyond images and signifiers. The concept Lacan invents for the non-representable remainder is the object *a*. "The [object] *a* is what remains irreducible in the advent of the subject at the locus of the Other, and it is from this that it is going to take on its function."<sup>4</sup> Characteristic of the object *a* is that it produces a breach in the experience of our identity. Because of the Real of the drive, essential aspects of who we are, remain at odds with the mental representations we construct of ourselves.

In Seminar XI (1964) we find the most elaborate account of what Lacan coins as the 'advent' of the subject, an expression he probably uses to mark the differences with the idea of development. The subject is an ever-shifting effect of the chain of signifiers, divided between the Real of the drive and the desire of the Other. The two constitutive processes are alienation and separation. Their net result is the subject as a hypokeimenon, a supposed being, because it is never really 'there'. In-between the Other and the subject-to-be, we find the object *a*, as a denomination for a lack. This lack is the motor for the formation of the subject and as we will see, it comes in two versions.

Ever since seminar XI, the focus in (post)lacanian theory has been on object *a* and jouissance. As a result, alienation and especially separation have received less attention. Later in this paper, I will argue that his idea of separation might present us with a solution for the impasse presented by alienation as described in the first part of this

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<sup>4</sup> Lacan 2004, p.189



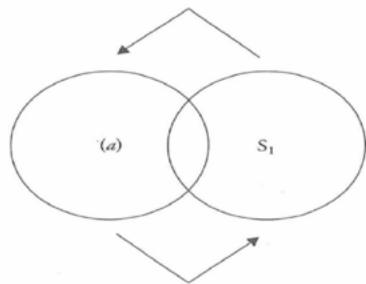
paper. Before that, I will present my reading of alienation and separation as described by Lacan in seminar XI.<sup>5</sup>

### *Alienation*

The advent of the subject takes place in a field of tension between the subject-to-be and the field of the Other: 'The Other is the locus in which the chain of the signifiers is situated – it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear.' (Lacan, J., 1998 [1964], p.203). Freud's theory about the ego is usually understood from a developmental point of view, governed by the pleasure principle. With Lacan, the accent lies on a structural point of view, that is, on a structure beyond development. Hence, the repercussions on the ontological level. Alienation is the basic mechanism: the subject-to-be identifies with the signifiers of the desire of the (m)Other.

Implicit in Lacan's reasoning, we can assume the existence of a 'primal' alienation. This first level concerns a mythical point of origin – mythical because of the very idea of origin – in which "l'être" (being) as such must make its appearance in the field of the Other, of language. This coincides with what Freud, in his essay on Moses, calls 'hominization' ('Menschwerdung'), the process of becoming a human being (Freud, S., 1978 [1939a [1937-39]], p.75, p.113). On the whole, this is what Lacan had already described in his paper on the mirror stage. A real part of the drive is processed through the first signifier coming from the Other. Thus is laid the foundation of human identity, immediately indicating its alienated nature. The attribution of our identity comes from the Other, the subject must identify with the presented images and signifiers. This occurs in a relation in which the Other assumes responsibility for removing the original unpleasure or arousal (Lacan, J., 1998 [1964], pp.203-216). The latter nevertheless continues to insist, resulting in the circular and never-ending character of this earliest process.

Figure 1. 'Primal' alienation



<sup>5</sup> In another paper, I have explained Lacan's advent of the subject with Freud's metapsychology, see Verhaeghe 1998

In the figure, the bottom arrow indicates 'beings' appeal to the Other, from whom it receives its first signifier. Hence the top arrow, indicating the founding identification with the S1. As a result, a is displaced to the external side of the subject-to-be, and more specifically to the intersection between the two circles (see figure 2 below). This process is a never ending one, because a can never be completely answered for, resulting in the need for more and more signifiers, turning subject-formation into an endless process.

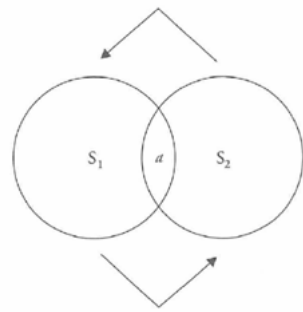
Even at this primary level, the effects are quite dramatic: when 'being' makes its appearance on the level of language, the subject loses the reality of its being. For Lacan, this is a matter of choice, albeit a very special choice, for whatever decision is made, one element is lost forever. He compares this to a classical dilemma presented by a robber: 'Your money or your life!'. Whatever you choose, you will lose your money anyway. The element lost in the process of becoming a human being is being itself, the thing without a name, leaving us with a 'loss of being' as a condition for our becoming, which Lacan calls the "manque à être" (the want-to-be, or lack of being).<sup>6</sup> Thus, right from the start, the subject is divided between the necessary loss of its being on the one hand and the ever-alienating meaning coming from the Other on the other hand.

This primal alienation presents the human being with a first identity and a first mastery of the Real of the drive based on the Symbolic. Such a mastery is structurally incomplete, hence the necessity to make a new appeal to the Other. The continuation of the subject-formation takes place within language and amounts to a continuous extension of the chain of signifiers through which the subject continues to acquire more of an identity in relation to the Other. This is alienation in its most well-known version.

Such an acquisition process is not neutral but constructed within a dialectic of desire on top of the insisting real part of the drive. The Other is responsible for answering to a, but in order to receive this answer, the subject-to-be must identify with the Other's desire. The relation between the subject and the Other will come to take on specific content and form, depending on the reactions of the significant others and the choices made by the subject-to-be (see figure 2). The earliest identity (the 'I' of the mirror stage) – here indicated by S1 – expands with further signifiers S2, presented by the Other, attempting to obtain a final answer to the drive. But it is precisely the impossibility of ever receiving such a final answer that makes this process endless. The original division between the subject-to-be and its being is continued here by the division over several signifiers; consequently, the subject will never again be able to coincide with 'itself', with the S1 of the first mirror identity, let alone with its body.

<sup>6</sup> Lacan 1998 [1964], p.29

Figure 2. Alienation



Here, Lacan's description of the subject as a hypokeimenon is obvious, as it continuously appears and disappears from signifier to signifier: "[A] signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier."<sup>7</sup> Again, the subject can 'choose' its signifiers in the field of the Other ('Your money or your life'). Yet again, there is a limited choice because the Other determines the possibilities of the choice. This reminds me of a fundamental remark made by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. The Swiss linguist demonstrated the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified; as there is no natural or essential relation between a word (signifier) and the thing (signified) to which it refers, anybody can name anything as he likes. But, says de Saussure, the choice has already been made before an individual speaker enters the scene, hence his famous expression: 'la carte forcée de la langue', meaning that the free choice in language is a 'set-up'.<sup>8</sup> In Lacanian terms: the Other determines the possibilities of our choice.

Thus considered, the acquisition of identity comes down to a continuously progressing symbolic realization of the subject. In view of its starting point, such a realization is contingent, necessary, and impossible. The contingency has to do with the random nature of the interaction – initially centered on the body – between the subject and Other. Family and culture in general determine the mirroring presented to the infant; another family and another culture might have presented different mirroring's and hence a different identity. The necessity is a consequence of the compelling nature of the drive tension, insisting for an attempt at mastery. The impossibility is caused by the structural gap between the Real of a and the Symbolic character of the signifier. Hence the double negation in Lacan's statement: 'It doesn't stop not being written.'<sup>9</sup> In simple terms: we will never end with our body, nor with the Other, hence the need for more.

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7 Lacan 2006d

8 de Saussure 1960, p. 71. Baskin has translated 'la carte forcée' as 'the stated deck'. In the more recent translation of Saussure's work by Harris, 'La carte forcée de la langue' is rendered as 'the linguistic Hobson's choice'. See: de Saussure 1983, p. 71.

9 Lacan 1998 (1972-73), p.94, p.144

The important thing about the subject is that it has no essence, no ontological substance. Its production is by the signifiers, coming from the field of the Other, but it would be a mistake to assume that a subject is identical to the produced signifier(s). A fixed identification with several signifiers presents us with the ego. In this sense, the Lacanian subject is exactly the opposite of the Cartesian one. In the formula 'I think, therefore I am' Descartes concludes from his thinking that he has a being, whereas for Lacan, each time (conscious) thinking arises, its being disappears under the signifier.

This explains two basic characteristics of the Lacanian subject: it is always at an indeterminate place and it is essentially divided: "Alienation consists in this *vel*, which - if you do not object to the word condemned, I will use it - condemns the subject to appearing only in that division which, it seems to me, I have just articulated sufficiently by saying that, if it appears on one side as meaning, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as *aphanisis*."<sup>10</sup>

Lacan distances himself from any idea of substantiality. The division does not take place between a real or authentic part and a false external one; the division defines the subject as such. The subject is split from its real being and forever tossed between eventually contradicting signifiers coming from the Other.

This rather pessimistic view confronts us with the question of the ends and goals of psychotherapy and even larger, with the question about determination and choice. Alienation seems to be inevitable and total. Paradoxical as this may seem, Lacan's point of view is more optimistic than the Freudian one. Freud's theory is on the whole quite deterministic, whereas Lacan leaves an element of choice, albeit a 'forced' choice. It is this element that brings us to the second operation in the advent of the subject, i.e. separation.

### Separation

If alienation were all-encompassing, everyone would perfectly coincide with the story dictated to them by the Other. There are several reasons why this is not the case. First, and above all, because the causal starting point, the drive tension *a*, can never fully be answered; it continues to insist. Moreover, the different answers of the different others presented to the subject-to-be, will inevitably contain contradictions. Consequently, the subject must continually make choices, confronted with a usually unspoken question: "Who do you love the most?" Independent of these internal contradictions and the ensuing division, there is a third reason why alienation is never complete: the chain of signifiers contains a lack, meaning that 'it' can never

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10 Lacan 1998 [1964 p. 210. The *vel* refers to a process of forced choice, whereas *aphanisis* indicates a fading of the subject.

be said. "This is what they're saying to me, but what does he or she want?"<sup>11</sup>

As a result, subject-formation circles around a lack that comes in two versions. The original drive tension in the Real – the jouissance – can neither be fully represented nor mastered by the Symbolic, and, it is precisely for that reason, the latter continues to maintain a structural opening. The excess of the Real reappears in the Symbolic's shortfall, its inability to 'say it all'; viewed from a Freudian standpoint, this makes up the core of the unconscious, Freud's "kernel of our being."<sup>12</sup> From the subject's interactions with the Other, the primordial lack reappears within the chain of signifiers as that part of the Other's desire that cannot be fully represented and continues to insist through the signifiers. It is precisely at this point that the second process in the advent of the subject, i.e. separation, becomes a possibility.

The lack in the chain of signifiers – the unrepresentable part of the desire of the Other – inhibits total alienation and opens up the possibility for separation and a desire 'of one's own', albeit with a continued dependence on the Other's desire.<sup>13</sup> A desire 'of one's own' comes down to a conscious choice for and a conscious interpretation of the Other's desire, with the subject's own drive in the background. Such an interpretation always contains a choice for the subject itself, through which it influences its own identity formation and acquires a certain autonomy. The latter is a third important concept, besides authenticity and alienation.

Where alienation was based on a set composed by the two circles, separation can be seen in their intersection (see figure 2) where the two lacks meet – the Real of the drive in relation to the Symbolic; the enigmatic desire of the Other. Lacan reminds us that we can read separation both etymologically and homonymically, as in the Latin verb 'se parare', to give birth to oneself or in the French 'se parer', to clothe oneself, to defend oneself.<sup>14</sup> The subject defends itself against the Real of the drive by obtaining a representation and, hence, mastery of it, through the Other. This explains why the original defense against the Real of the drive shifts to a defense against the Other's desire. In the course of this, the subject must interpret the desire of the Other. Such an interpretation of the Other's lack always implies an interpretation of the relationship as well, where the subject ascribes a specific position both to itself and to the Other.

Important in this respect is the difference between the original lack – the structurally determined lack in the Symbolic in relation to the Real of the drive – and the lack in the chain of signifiers because it is impossible to signify fully what the Other desires. Beneath the gap in the

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11 Lacan 1998 (1964), p. 214

12 Freud 1978 (1990a), p. 525

13 Lacan 1998 [1964], pp.211ff

14 Ibid., pp.214-215

chain of signifiers, the original drive impulse of the organism persists. In the dialectical exchanges with the Other, the subject expects the Other to provide the answer to the original drive impulse. Furthermore, this impulse is attributed to the Other, though translated in terms of desire: What does this Other want from me?

In the confrontation with this desire that can never be fully met, the normal-hysteric subject produces a characteristic reaction: does this Other *really* desire me, can I satisfy his or her desire? At this point, the never-ending dialectic between a subject-to-be and the Other is set in motion. Lacan's saying, "Desire is the desire of the Other" can thus be understood as: the subject desires that the Other desires the subject and is therefore prepared to go a long way in the process of alienation, i.e. a long way in identifying with the supposed desire of the Other. The ultimate testing of the Other's desire takes shape in those fantasies where the subject visualizes its own death, with the intent of measuring the Other's reactions: "Can she or he lose me?"<sup>15</sup> A large number of suicidal fantasies and even suicide attempts can be understood in this context and amount to a final stage in alienation. Separation presents us with a better answer.

Separation presupposes the ability to detach oneself from the original dual relation with the Other, where previously the only possibilities were either to fuse entirely with, or to completely distance oneself from the Other; i.e., the impossible dilemma presented by a robber: 'your money or your life!' ('la bourse ou la vie'). Through separation, self-determination becomes a possibility, although this is far from self-evident. The inherent difficulties of autonomy become clear when Lacan discusses separation as an aim for a psychoanalytic cure.

A psychoanalytic treatment is a social praxis based upon a relation between a subject-to-be (the patient) and the Other-who-is-supposed-to-know (the analyst). Consequently, the processes of alienation and separation will be preeminently present. It is fair to say that Lacan links neurosis and especially hysteria to alienation, whilst presenting separation as a possible answer based on a psychoanalytic process. Lacan abhorred the idea of an analysis ending in an identification with the analyst, which would imply just another alienation. The desire of the analyst as an analyst desire ought to aim at the exact opposite, namely absolute difference.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us back to ontology. From the point of view of alienation, the subject has no substance whatsoever; it is an ever-fading effect of the symbolic order, the Other. At this point, Lacanian theory belongs to constructionism and determinism. Ideas of authenticity, self-realization

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15 Ibid., p.214

16 Ibid., p.276

and autonomy do not belong to this line of thought. They never will, yet the accent shifts once the Real is introduced. Through separation, the subject receives an element of choice. Ultimately, the choice is an impossible one, insofar as the choice has already been made and the aimed-for separation *takes the shape of a peculiar form of identification*.

The first developments of this idea can be found in Seminar XI, where Lacan suggests the existence of another form of identification, inaugurated by the process of separation, and thus by the object *a*: “Through the function of the object *a*, the subject separates himself off, ceases to be linked to the vacillation of being, in the sense that it forms the essence of alienation.”<sup>17</sup> This idea is not developed any further in this seminar and can hardly be understood here. We must turn to Lacan’s final conceptualizations, where this special identification/separation is understood from the standpoint of the analytical goal of analytic treatment. It must be said that this further elaboration is limited and obscure.

What is the goal of an analysis? At first sight, the answer is strange: a successful analysis ought to bring the subject to the point where she can identify with the symptom. Normally, i.e. neurotically, a symptom is based on an identification with signifiers presented by the Other. The identification as the result of an analysis is a special one, because it concerns an identification *with the Real of the symptom*, meaning its root in the drive, and thus it concerns an identification on the level of being<sup>18</sup> (This is exactly the counterpart of what the analysand experienced before, namely the identification/alienation with the (desire of the) Other and the accompanying belief in this Other, and thus in the existence of an Other without a lack.<sup>19</sup> The analytic experience makes clear that this Other does not exist, and hence that the subject does not exist either.

The discovery of the inconsistency of the Other results in a mirror effect. If the Other is inconsistent, then the same goes for the subject, and both of them tumble down from their positions. In this way, the subject comes to “subjective destitution”: it assumes the non-existence of the non-barred Other and the non-existence of itself as a ‘that’s me’-subject. Such a subjective destitution entails the possibility for a radical form of separation, paving the way to the real being of the subject, son “être du sujet”. From that point onwards, the subject can no longer be reduced to a mere “answer to/from the Other” (“une réponse de l’Autre”); on the contrary, the subject is now an “answer to/from the real” (“une réponse du réel”). Thus, the idea of “se parer”, to engender oneself, as it was announced in Seminar XI, is realized after all.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.258

<sup>18</sup> Lacan 1977 [1976-77], pp.6-7

<sup>19</sup> Lacan 1975 [1974-5], p.109

This brings us to the idea of creation. Indeed, in my opinion, the “identification with the real of the symptom” must be understood through the idea of creation, as already presented in Lacan’s earlier ideas on sublimation and *creatio ex nihilo* in his seminar on ethics. The subject can ‘choose’ to elevate nothing into something and to enjoy this: “The object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing.”<sup>20</sup> Applied to the goal of analysis, this means that, the subject may create its own symptom in the Real and identify with it. In this way, such a symptom takes the place of what is forever lacking. Finally, it takes the place of the lacking sexual rapport and furnishes a self-made answer to it, instead of the previous, Other-made ones.

Lacan accentuates this shift by introducing a neologism. The subject must become a *sinthome*, i.e. a combination of ‘symptôme’ (symptom) and ‘saint homme’ (holy man). ‘On the level of the sinthome . . . there is relationship. There is only relationship where there is sinthome.’<sup>21</sup> This delineates a before and an afterwards. Previously, the subject-to-be believed in his neurotic symptoms, which yielded an imaginary answer to the lack of the Other and which at once located the jouissance within the Other. At the end of analysis, the identification with the *sinthome* is a real answer, providing the subject not only with consistency, but also with jouissance.

Needless to say, this part of Lacan’s theory is difficult to follow. The main thing to understand is that the real part of the body comes to the foreground. With this final theory, Lacan introduces another subject, one that has a kind of substantiality. It no longer focuses on the (lack of the) Other, that is, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. Rather, this neo-subject tries to come to terms with the Real of the jouissance dictated by its own drive, without falling back into the previous trap of stuffing it full of signification coming from the Other. This is how the decision, the choice of the subject, is to be understood: it makes a choice to create a *sinthome*. If there is anything original or authentically present, it should be looked for in the Real of the body and the drive.

Elegant and mysterious as this solution may be, it nevertheless contains a serious flaw. The trouble is that such a decision or choice by the subject implies the existence of a decision-taking system, *independent* of the Other. This hardly tallies with the constitutive process of becoming a subject, that is, the alienation, which makes the subject-to-be dependent on the Other – hence the necessity of the ideas of separation and destitution. It is not clear where such a decision-making system can be situated. It seems as if the organism is responsible for such a choice, and that the subject-to-be should identify with the

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<sup>20</sup> Lacan 1992 [1959-69], p.112

<sup>21</sup> Lacan 1976 [1975-76], p. 20 (my translation). For a documented discussion of the ‘sinthome’, see Verhaeghe, & Declercq 2002.



requirements presented by the body. At that point, the decision-making system acquires *substantiality* through its decision. In its turn, this does not tally with the idea that the subject lacks any kind of essence whatsoever.

## Implications & critical discussion

### *The originality of Lacan's approach*

Philosophical theories discuss alienation as an ontological problem on the level of society. A psychoanalytical approach, starting with Freud, studies the same process on the individual level (identification), where it is necessary for the development of an identity but not necessarily a problem. Lacan combines the social-cultural and the individual level with his concept of the Other. The primary caretakers, usually the parents, present the infant with images and words mirroring a first sense of identity and an attempt at drive regulation through symbolization. Their images and words reflect the cultural discourse and – even larger – the symbolic order. The Other summarizes all the different ways of presenting the Symbolic order to the subject, with the internet as its latest instrument.

A striking difference between a psychoanalytical approach and the philosophical reading of alienation, is that for Lacan identification with images and signifiers coming from the Other is inevitable, because there is no original identity whatsoever. Hence the fact that every identification is an alienation. Lacan quotes T.S. Eliot: “We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!”<sup>22</sup> The very kernel of our personality is an empty space: peeling off layer after layer of identification in search of the substantial nucleus of one's personality, one ends up with nothing. Obviously for Lacan there is no original self.

A second difference concerns the motive. In social theory, alienation is a process induced by the dominant powers in a society – capitalism, institutionalized religion – to mislead the subordinate group. A cultural discourse propagates social norms, values, and social systems in such a way that most people identify with them, even when it goes against their own interests. In psychoanalysis, the motive for identification/alienation is the original powerlessness against one's own drives. One of the definitions that Freud formulated about the drive voices the endlessness of this process: it is 'as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work'.<sup>23</sup> This psychic elaboration – in

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<sup>22</sup> Lacan 2006b, p. 234; Eliot 1925, 1974, pp. 87-92.  
The same idea returns in: 'Man's desire is the desire of the other', Lacan 1988 [1953-54], p.146, and in 'The unconscious is the discourse of the Other'. Lacan 1993 [1955-56]), p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> Freud, 1978 [1905d], p.168, added 1915. These ideas appear for the first time in the *Entwurf* (1978 [1950a [1895]]) where Freud talks about the endogenous excitations as something that the organism needs to discharge, but he has to acknowledge that a full discharge

contemporary terms: affect regulation – is the most important part of our identity. Identifying with social norms and value systems – see Freud's Super-Ego – helps us to master our drives. Such mastery, as offered by the Other, may lead to a process of alienation as put forward by social theory, i.e. alienation that goes against the interests of the subject. This was one of Freud's starting-points, as illustrated by the title of one of his early papers: '*Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness* (1908). Here, psychoanalytical identification and social alienation meet.

At first, Lacan's theory on alienation is more pessimistic than social theory: there is no authentic identity whatsoever, alienation is part of the human condition. As a process, it knows no ending because there is no final answer to the drive; determination seems to be everywhere. At a second glance, this is not the case. The most striking innovation is Lacan's introduction of 'separation'. In developmental psychology and in attachment theory, separation, sometimes called individuation, is a major developmental step for the child to acquire a more independent position. In Lacan's reading, separation receives a larger importance. The determination of the subject by the Other can never be total and final, because there is a structurally determined mismatch between the Real of the body and the Symbolic order. Consequently, there is an opening in the alienating chain of images and signifiers, permitting an escape from determination. The subject-to-be has a limited possibility to make choices of his own.

This choice comes in two versions, a weak and a strong one. The subject is presented with a never-ending series of signifiers and images to identify with; not one of them offers a definite answer to the existential questions ('Who am I? As a man, a woman, a parent, a ...'). On the condition that the subject has become conscious of the lack of a definite answer, s/he can choose between the many offered possibilities and consciously identify with his/her choice. Such a conscious choice will always be accompanied by a feeling of provisionality, as there are no definite answers.

This is the weak version of separation because the answers that are chosen, are still coming from the Other. I have already compared such a limited choice to the 'set-up' in language, as described by De Saussure. The same comparison can be further developed, as an example of separation and choice: a longstanding couple in love develops within their language an intimate speech of their own; their 'dialect' is based on the common language but contains a number of idiosyncratic choices turning it into 'their' language. The main difference with alienation as such is the fact that the subject makes a conscious choice between different possibilities in the full knowledge that not one of them is definite.

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is impossible.

The stronger version of separation is the creation of something new, a solution that goes for this subject, in view of her experiences in matters of jouissance. That is what Lacan described with the neologism 'sinthome', based on an identification with a part of the Real. In view of its idiosyncratic nature, it is hard to explain this solution – the main thing that can be said about it, is that the body plays a central role. In my final part, I will return to the importance of the body.

Earlier in this paper, I mentioned the analogy between separation on the social level and separation as a goal of a psychoanalytical therapy. My experience as an analyst has convinced me that this is possible, albeit often enough in combination with a personal trauma that obliges the individual to rethink his/her life. It is a better solution than the conventional one, where the Other/others are blamed (from the parents to 'the system') and the possibility for a personal choice is denied.

A clinical vignette illustrates how separation may operate as a personal choice, even when almost invisible to the outside world. A man in his mid-forties enters analysis because of generalized feelings of depression and alienation (he uses the word himself). Raised in a working-class family with a father who was an active union member, he has become a lawyer himself, working in and for the same union. Over the years, the confrontation with political corruption and the like has turned him into a middle-aged cynic. During his analysis, the oedipal determinations of his professional choice are a major issue: is he really interested in working for the union, or is it because of his father? He experiences what Lacan described in his *Discourse de Rome*: "For in the work [i.e. analysis] he does to reconstruct it [his identity] for another, he encounters anew the fundamental alienation that made him construct it like another, and that was always destined to be taken away from him by another."<sup>24</sup> Whilst working through his oedipal history, he develops his own interests in union work. At the end of his analysis, he makes a conscious choice to continue his job, trying to make the best of it without being naïve or cynical. He is changed, just as his relation to the Other is changed. He has separated himself from a previous alienating identification, by making a conscious choice for a revised version of the same identification.

### *Diagnosis of alienation?*

The man in the clinical vignette was painfully aware of his alienation. As I mentioned in the first section of this article, this is often not the case, as illustrated in the idea of 'false consciousness'. In social theory, it is widely accepted that people can suffer from alienation without being aware of it. In most cases, they will continue to endorse the Other who is the source of their alienation. This challenges us with a problem that is

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<sup>24</sup> Lacan 2006b, pp.207-208

well-known in psychiatry: how do you reach somebody who is not aware of her (mental) problems? How can you convince her that something is wrong, and that change is needed?

Obviously, these questions can be addressed on an individual and on a social level; when looking for an answer, on both levels we encounter the same problems. In my introduction, I referred to 'alienation' as an older denomination for mental illness. Ever since the start of psychiatry, its diagnostic system has been in search for objective diagnostic criteria. Contemporary psychiatry is desperately looking for somatic criteria, the so-called body markers. Despite all the research, so far there are no convincing results. A second line of diagnostic thought starts from the difference between the patient in her present condition and her original true self. E.g. an individual suffering from anorexia is convinced that she is fat, even when she is starving. In this case, the therapist can tell her what her normal body mass index should be. Unfortunately, with most psychiatric problems, it is far from obvious what a true self might be. A third diagnostic ground assesses the difference between a patient and a normal individual by using conventional normality as a norm. This is the case with the *DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)*, the handbook that is used worldwide by most psychiatrists today. The critique on its latest version formulated by the British Psychological Society reflects the same problem faced by social theory when looking for a benchmark.<sup>25</sup> The definition of a normal, non-alienated person is arbitrary and expresses the norms and value systems of a dominant group. This explains why psychiatry is always at risk of becoming an enforcer of a given social order. From time to time, it changes sides and becomes a critique of the system, as Freud-Marxism and the antipsychiatry did in the sixties.

The third diagnostic ground illustrates how alienation on both individual and social levels are related and even mixt. This mixture obliges us to look for another approach to the problems with which I began my introduction (is there an original self? How to make a difference between a 'good' and a 'bad' me?). Obviously, from a psychoanalytical point of view, there is nothing wrong with identification, even when every identification turns out to be an alienation. In case something goes wrong, we might have an objective criterion after all, by looking at the starting-point of alienation. For Lacan, that is 'being', i.e. the body.

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<sup>25</sup> The letter of critique was sent in June 2011 to the editors of the DSM. An extract: 'The putative diagnoses presented in DSM-V are clearly based largely on social norms, with 'symptoms' that all rely on subjective judgements, with little confirmatory physical 'signs' or evidence of biological causation. The criteria are not value-free, but rather reflect current normative social expectations. Many researchers have pointed out that psychiatric diagnoses are plagued by problems of reliability, validity, prognostic value, and co-morbidity.' (My italics; see <https://dxrevisionwatch.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/dsm-5-2011-bps-response.pdf>)

*The 'true self' is the body*

In my opinion, the criterion by which to decide whether a certain alienation is good or bad, must be looked for in the very foundation upon which the advent of the subject is constructed, meaning the body as an organism. The alienation imposed by the Other does not only affect the body image (as explained by Lacan's mirror stage), it aims at regulating the organism and the drives as well. The effect of alienations on the body and its image is a good criterion to judge the desirability of a given alienation.

The first example that I can present here is gender identity and the emancipation of women. In that respect, it seems that the battle is ended and won. In a free (western) world, women can choose to wear a bikini, a monokini or a burkini. In the same free world, they can choose for breast implants and liposuction. And what about vaginal corrections, the latest hit in so-called aesthetic surgery for women, as a western variant of religious genital mutilation, although without the protesting against it?

You don't need to be a psychoanalyst to see that such choices have nothing to do with a choice, let alone with emancipation. They are the effect of a new alienation that is much less visible because it is disguised as an individual search for 'excellence', based on a continuously produced media stream of images showing perfect bodies. This disguise goes for every contemporary alienation, but the examples give me the possibility to make a differentiation between alienations that can be undone and those that cannot. Making a choice for a bikini or a burkini is a choice that is reversible – it leaves the body intact. Making a choice for a genital mutilation cannot be undone, the body is literally mutilated. Alienations that are irreversible and damaging to the body are by definition pathological alienations.

Such choices are presented as individual decisions, but of course they are induced by the Other. The personal is the political, and the same reasoning can be applied to less obvious alienations. Excellence, entrepreneurship and growth have become the new moral obligations, in a perpetual competition with others and – since social media and their different versions of 'like buttons' – with ourselves. Here, we can make the same analysis as in the case of breast implants and genital mutilation. The 'work hard, play hard' ethic is presented as a choice, whilst it is an imposed rat race in disguise. We have been running in a maze for at least three decades now, and the effects on our bodies are becoming more and more obvious. The prevalence numbers of chronic illnesses and medically unexplainable symptoms (irritable bowel syndrome, chronic pain, being tired all the time, sleeping problems and the like) have been steadily rising, as well as with patients suffering from diabetes and auto-immune diseases. If you look at the most advanced medical research, time and time again the same explanation is put forward: these diseases are stress related, they are the result of chronic stress induced by our way of living. Our body goes on strike or becomes ill.

After all is said and done, a diagnosis of a pathological alienation may be less difficult as it seemed at first sight. Our identity clothes our body – if the clothing makes that body ill, it is time to look for a new outfit or to reconsider the outfit we are wearing.

*Appropriation, reconciliation, separation.*

From Rousseau onwards, alienation has been presented as a problem in need of a solution. Because of the way our identity is constructed, two reactions to this problem are to be expected. The subject-to-be works hard to meet the desire of the Other, by modeling his looks, thoughts, and identity as much as possible to what she assumes the Other expects from her. When she becomes aware of the futility of her efforts or – even worse – gets ill, her reaction is either self-blaming (I did not work hard enough, I am a failure) or blaming the Other (the politicians, society, God, or the stock market). Such reactions are predictable, because of the dual nature of the constitutive relation between subject and Other. As a solution, neither of them is useful. By way of conclusion I want to discuss a third reaction that might escape the pitfalls of dualism. This reaction appears in two closely related processes: appropriation (Jaeggi) and reconciliation (Hegel), in relation to Lacan's separation.

In her book on alienation, Rahel Jaeggi revives the concept and defends its legitimacy. Her aim is to get rid of the defects of essentialism. She understands alienation as an impairment of self-determination and as a consequence of the inability to identify with one's own desires and actions. Her solution is *appropriation*, the process through which "one is present in one's actions, steers one's life instead of being driven by it, independently appropriates social roles, is able to identify with one's desires, and is involved in the world."<sup>26</sup> She avoids the classic pitfall (what is the true nature of man?) by focusing on the process of self-determination. What is realized is less important than the way in which it is realized.

Her book is rich and thoughtful, especially because she takes the trouble to present the reader with four detailed examples of contemporary real-life alienation, where agency and self-realization is missing. When presenting her solution ("a productive process of practical (self-)appropriation"),<sup>27</sup> she falls prey to what is probably unavoidable, i.e. the presentation of a teleological ideal in combination with the assumption that man is free to choose. Whilst avoiding carefully the essentialist tradition, her ideal is a postmodern human being that looks for self-realization.

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<sup>26</sup> Jaeggi 2014, p.255

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.152

One of Raeggi's major inspirations is Hegel. He is notoriously difficult, so I admit immediately that my knowledge of his theory is based on a thought-provoking study by Michael Hardimon in 1992. Important to know is that Hegel interpreted alienation quite differently compared to its commonly accepted meaning. Alienation is not a detrimental effect of modern society on the individual; it is a consequence of a failure in the individual, who fails to understand that the modern social world could be a home, giving him the opportunity to realize himself. Hegel's philosophical project was to help his contemporaries to overcome their estrangement from the new world. *Reconciliation* is the key word in this project.

Hardimon takes care to delineate the concept. It is not resignation or submission, as it involves complete and wholehearted acceptance (on condition that the social world is worthy of such an acceptance) in the full knowledge that even the modern society contains problematic features and conflicts. Reconciliation is an active process and 'a matter of *subjective appropriation*.<sup>128</sup> Alienation is being split from the social world, reconciliation is the process of overcoming that split. This is necessary because humans need to be connected to the new social world of the modern state. Hegel being Hegel, the possibility of such a connection is the result of a historical process that brings humanity to complete self-knowledge. Obviously, the solution is there, right for the taking – the modern world presents us with a home – on condition that we overcome our hesitations and lack of (self-)knowledge.

It is not too difficult to recognize Jaeggi's appropriation in (Hardimon's reading of) Hegel's reconciliation. A comparison with Lacan's solution – a particular kind of identification, based on the separation from the Other – shows similarities and differences. Self-knowledge is necessary, especially the knowledge that there is no original self. Implicit in Lacan's reasoning, the important self-knowledge concerns the division of the subject and the constitutive lack. The intimate deliberation with myself on the subject of myself may lead to the choice for a new identification, on the condition that the subject has come to terms with its inherent incompleteness. Appropriation, reconciliation or separation require active humility.

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28 Hardimon 1992, p. 182, italics original

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