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Kant's Four Discourses

In his preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes four metaphysical discourses, each of which he represents as a form of society. The first is the discourse of the dogmatist. It appeared in antiquity when the reign of “the queen of the sciences” was administered by despotic ministers (Kant 1997, pp. Aviii-ix). Because of squabbles among the ministers and disgruntlement among the subjects a second discourse soon arose: the discourse of the skeptics, “a kind of nomads” who “shattered civil unity from time to time” (Aix). Since the skeptics were outnumbered, they could not prevent the dogmatists from continuing to build metaphysical systems, but they were strong enough to undermine their foundations. For years the state of metaphysics hovered between despotism and anarchy until a third discourse eventually arose: the discourse of the indifferentist. The indifferentist professes to be indifferent to metaphysics, but, since it is impossible to be completely indifferent, the indifferentist makes metaphysical pronouncements, typically on the basis of common sense rather than rational argumentation. As Matthew Kelsey and Güçsal Pular have independently shown, Kant takes indifferentism to pose a greater threat to metaphysics than dogmatism and skepticism (Kelsey 2013, Pular 2022). It is “the mother of chaos and night in the sciences” (Ax). The appearance of this monstrous mother has caused

the queen to mourn like Ovid's Hecuba: "*Modo maxima rerum, tot generis natisque potens – nunc trahor exul, inops* ["Greatest of all by race and birth, I now am cast out, powerless]" (Aviii-ix). To restore the queen to her rightful place of honor, Kant proposes carrying out a revolution – not a Copernican Revolution, but a Glorious Revolution. Toward this end, he introduces a fourth discourse, one that is critical, or juridical, in character. The queen must be put on trial to determine the limits of her jurisdiction.

There are obvious parallels between Kant's four discourses and the four discourses that Lacan presents in his seminar *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Although Lacan's discourses are not overtly metaphysical, they characterize "the social link" (Lacan 1998, p. 17) in ways that resemble Kant's discourses. The discourse of the dogmatist is analogous to the discourse of the master. Just as the dogmatist tells people what to think, so the master (signified by S_1) tells the slave (signified by S_2)¹ what to do. In addition, the master prevents the slave from thinking by stealing his knowledge, i.e., by converting the slave's know-how into *episteme*, as Lacan takes to be the point of Socrates's instruction of the slave in Plato's *Meno* (Lacan 2007, pp. 21-22). This example links the master to the figure of the philosopher. Lacan further associates the divided subject ($\$$), who appears in the lower left corner of the discourse of the master, with the alienated consciousness of Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Lacan 2007, p. 89). This suggests that the process by which Hegel's unhappy consciousness achieves self-consciousness can be identified with the clockwise quarter turn from the master's discourse to the hysteric's discourse. Through this turn, the divided subject comes to occupy the place of the master.² The discourse of the hysteric is analogous to the discourse of the skeptic, which Hegel represents as a transitional stage between the stoical and unhappy consciousnesses (Hegel 2018, pp. 84-6). Just as the hysteric challenges the authority of the master, so the skeptic challenges the authority of the dogmatist. Accord-

¹ Here the chain of signifiers signifies the chains that bind the slave.

² Lacan treats the terms of the discourse of the master as places as well as terms. Thus, in the discourse of the hysteric, the subject comes to occupy the position of the master signifier, while the master signifier shifts its position to the place of knowledge, and so on.

ing to the clocklike logic of Lacan's models, the quarter turn from the master's discourse to the hysteric's discourse is both literally and figuratively revolutionary, as is the quarter turn from the dogmatist's discourse to the skeptic's discourse. The arrow on the top line of each discourse marks the relation between its speaker and its addressee. In the master's discourse, this relation takes the form of an imperative or command. The fact that the slave is in the position of knowledge does not mean that the master conveys information to the slave or that the master seeks to learn something from the slave. The master's aim is to set the slave's knowledge to work in order to produce the object of surplus enjoyment that Lacan signifies by the *objet petit a*. In the hysteric's discourse, the relation of speaker to addressee is interrogative rather than imperative. Once again, the hysteric is not trying to learn something from the master. The point of the hysteric's question is to provoke the master. In this respect, the hysteric's discourse is no less performative than the master's. The same can be said of the skeptic's discourse, which aims at revealing the ignorance of the dogmatist.

An even more intriguing parallel can be found between the discourse of the indifferentist and the discourse of the university. The latter discourse can be generated by rotating the terms of the master's discourse in a counterclockwise rather than clockwise direction – a counterrevolutionary turn. In this discourse, the master's position is occupied by the institutionalized body of knowledge (S_2). Addressing his Parisian audience in the wake of the events of May 1968, Lacan takes students to occupy the position of the *objet a*, the addressee of the university discourse. The discursive relation between S_2 and *a* is disciplinary rather than imperative or interrogative. The university assumes the place of the master when knowledge, like capital, becomes autonomous. Although the discourse of the master has not disappeared, it tends under capitalism to be subordinated to the discourse of the university. In precisely the same way, the discourse of the dogmatist tends to be subordinated to the discourse of the indifferentist. In fact, the two tendencies coincide, for the university is the institutionalized form of indifferentism. As the sciences have developed, they have grown indifferent to metaphysics – or only apparently so, since popularizing scientists routinely make metaphysical pronouncements.

Kant was well aware of this trend. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he takes pains to subordinate the discourse of the university to the discourse of the critic by giving the faculty of philosophy the right to criticize the faculties of theology, law, and medicine. His attempt to place the critic within the university bears comparison with Lacan's attempts to house his seminar in one of the major Parisian universities. Lacan's failure to accomplish this is nowhere more evident than in the transcript of his visit to Vincennes, an experimental university that instituted a department of psychoanalysis, which he later tried to commandeer. Lacan and his audience talk past each other, agreeing on the desirability of transforming the university, but not at all on what this would involve or how it might be accomplished (Lacan 2007, pp. 197-208). Just as Vincennes grew out of the events of May, so the German university grew out of the French Revolution, whose significance lies at the heart of Kant's conflict with the faculty of law. In his essay "An old question raised again: Is the human race constantly progressing?", Kant observes that, prior to Copernicus, the planets seemed to move randomly back and forth rather than in perfect elliptical revolutions around the sun (Kant 1996a, p. 300). Analogously, the course of human history seems to be random because we lack an external standpoint with respect to which we could discern the guiding hand of Providence. Kant seeks to overcome this limitation by attending to the enthusiasm, or *jouissance*, felt by spectators for the Revolution (Kant 1996a, p. 302). On its basis, he confidently predicts that the human race is inexorably progressing toward the Platonic ideal of a republic. Kant characterizes his discourse as prophetic, noting that a successful prophet brings about what they prophesy precisely by prophesying it (Kant 1996a, pp. 297-98). Lacan's intervention at Vincennes also had a prophetic dimension. He said to his audience: "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one" (Lacan 2007, p. 207) – an act of divination worthy of the Hebrew prophet Hosea, whom he would briefly discuss the next year (Lacan 2007, pp. 115-16). Despite this outburst, Lacan denies that his rotating discourses provide an "Archimedes' lever" of the sort that Kant was looking for, or function as the "Ouija boards of history" (Lacan 2007, pp. 173, 188).

$$\frac{S_1 \rightarrow S_2}{\mathcal{G} \quad a}$$

MASTER/DOGMATIST

$$\frac{\mathcal{G} \rightarrow S_1}{a \quad S_2}$$

HYSTERIC/SKEPTIC

$$\frac{a \rightarrow \mathcal{G}}{S_2 \quad S_1}$$

ANALYST/CRITIC

$$\frac{S_2 \rightarrow a}{S_1 \quad S_2}$$

UNIVERSITY/INDIFFERENTIST

The analyst's discourse can be generated either by giving the university discourse one additional counterclockwise turn or by giving the hysteric's discourse one additional clockwise turn. Since it originally grew out of Breuer and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*, it would be natural to interpret the entire sequence of discourses as a linear progression from the master to the hysteric to the analyst to the university were it not for the fact that the university predates psychoanalysis. Addressed to the hysteric, the analyst's discourse is neither imperative, nor interrogative, nor disciplinary. It is interruptive. The hysteric oscillates between silence (aphasia) and logorrhea. The analyst interrupts the hysteric's silence by speaking and logorrhea by remaining silent. According to one of Lacan's schemas, the analyst occupies the position of desire in relation to the Other (Lacan 2007, p. 93), but just as the epistemic relation between the master and the slave does not concern the knowledge of the master, so the orectic relation between the analyst and the analysand does not concern the desire of the analyst. In playing the role of the object-cause of desire (*a*) (Lacan 2007, p. 53), the analyst prompts the subject to produce a new master signifier.

Just as the analyst's discourse can be generated through the hysteric's discourse or the university discourse, so the critic's discourse can be generated through the skeptic's discourse or the indifferentist's discourse. When Kant says that Hume woke him from his dogmatic slumber, he emphasizes the first route (Kant 2002, p. 57). When he attacks the commonsense philosophies of Reid, Oswald, and Beattie, as well as the "popular" philosophies of Eberhard, Feder, Garve, and Meiners, he emphasizes the second (Kant 2002, p. 56; Pumar 2022, p. 372). The failure of these

former," to quote Shakespeare's Malvolio, if we "crush [it] a little" as Malvolio does the letters M, O, A, I, we can locate the analyst as well as the critic in it (Shakespeare 1994, 2.5.131-32).³ Together the schemas of sadism and masochism depict two interrelated aspects of Kant's critique of practical reason. As Nietzsche and Freud first observed, there is something sadistic about Kant's categorical imperative (just as there is something Kantian about Sade's categorical imperative).⁴ On the other hand, there is something masochistic about the feeling of respect for the moral law (just as there is something Kantian about Masoch's desire to be the contracted instrument of the other's enjoyment). Unlike Deleuze, for whom the attitudes of the sadist and masochist toward the law are incommensurable,⁵ Lacan treats them as interchangeable. They can be likened to the positions of the doorkeeper and the man from the country in Kafka's "Before the Law" (Kafka 1971). In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant envisions an obscene obverse of Kafka's parable in which a man with lustful inclinations hesitates to enter a brothel because he knows that when he leaves he will be hanged (Kant 1996b, p. 163).⁶ In bringing out the sadomasochistic subtext of this scenario, which might be called "Before the Brothel," Lacan highlights the role that surplus *jouissance* plays in the critic's discourse, but he fails to acknowledge that the analyst and the critic are in the same quasi-perverse position. While he might be willing to concede the parallels between the

³ Note that the letters M, O, A, I appear in the word "masochism" as well as in the name "Malvolio."

⁴ "[T]he categorical imperative smells of cruelty . . ." (Nietzsche 1998, p. 41). "The super-ego, the conscience at work in it, can then become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge. The categorical imperative of Kant is thus a direct inheritance from the Oedipus-complex" (Freud 1991, p. 198). For Sade's categorical imperative, see Lacan 2006, p. 648.

⁵ "It would therefore be difficult to say that sadism turns into masochism and vice versa; what we have in each case is a paradoxical by-product, a kind of sadism being the humorous outcome of masochism, and a kind of masochism the ironic outcome of sadism" (Deleuze 1991, pp. 39-40).

⁶ "What analysis shows, if it shows anything at all . . . is very precisely the fact that we don't ever transgress. Sneaking around is not transgression. Seeing a door half-open is not the same as going through it. We shall have the occasion to come back to what I am introducing now - there is no transgression here, but rather an irruption, a falling into the field, of something not unlike *jouissance* - a surplus" (Lacan 2007, pp. 19-20).

dogmatist and master, skeptic and hysteric, indifferentist and university, he maintains that the critic is no analyst. Standing transfixed before the brothel or the law, Kant does not carry out the revolutionary turn – be it Glorious, Copernican, or Freudian – that would have led him from the hysteric's discourse or university discourse to the analyst's discourse.

Mladen Dolar has pointed out that Lacan credits Hegel with superlatively (i.e. sublimely) exhibiting the discourses of the master, hysteric, and university, but refuses to credit him with exemplifying the analyst's discourse (Dolar 2006). Yet, as Dolar points out, Hegel is, for us, a kind of analyst (Dolar 2006, pp. 149-50). Žižek goes one step further, suggesting that Lacan simply disavows Hegel's exemplification of the analyst's discourse (Žižek 2004, p. 57). Just as we can ask what we are in Hegel's eyes, so we can ask what Lacan is in Kant's eyes. From Kant's critical perspective, Lacan fails to raise the question *Quid juris?* with respect to the four discourses, just as Aristotle fails to provide an adequate deduction of the categories – a Kantian charge (A81/B107) that Hegel repeats against Kant himself (Hegel 2010, p. 86). When Lacan draws the four discourses on the blackboard, he answers the question *Quid facti?*, but without explaining why they are structured the way they are. As Brent Adkins pointed out in response to an earlier version of this paper, it is not clear why the terms of the discourses are restricted to the specific positions Lacan assigns them, precluding, in particular, any direct relation between the terms in opposite corners (Adkins 2024).⁷ Of course, Lacan would say that the philosophical question *Quid juris?* is not pertinent, since the analyst's function is to find and not deduce.⁸ But, from Kant's perspective, this is just to say that Lacan remains within the indifferentist's discourse.

⁷ I take this opportunity to thank Brent Adkins for his illuminating response to the version of this paper that was presented under the title "Lacan's Four Kantian Discourses" at the Sixty-Second Annual Meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy in Rochester, New York in September 2024, as well as members of the audience for their questions and comments. The idea for the paper grew out of a reading of Seminar XVII with Virgil Brower, Colby Dickinson, and Gregory Trotter.

⁸ "Personally, I have never regarded myself as a researcher. As Picasso once said, to the shocked surprise of those around him – *I do not seek, I find*" (Lacan 2018, p. 7).

To see how Kant would address the question *Quid juris?* with respect to the four discourses it is helpful to take a quick detour through Plato's *Parmenides*. In a passage that bears comparison with Socrates's instruction of the slave in the *Meno*, Parmenides tells Socrates that the greatest difficulty for the theory of forms is that the correlative relation between a master and a slave seems to have nothing to do with the correlative relation between the form of mastery and the form of slavery (Plato 1996, pp. 133d-134a). Aristotle resolves the difficulty by locating the forms of mastery and slavery in the master and slave themselves rather than beyond them. This solution requires the introduction of an underlying subject of predication (*hypokeimenon*). As Lacan never tires of pointing out, the divided subject ($\$$) that he places beneath the master signifier in the master's discourse is Aristotle's *hypokeimenon* (Lacan 2007, pp. 13, 48). In resolving the greatest difficulty for the theory of forms, Aristotle opens up a new difficulty for the theory of the subject, for it is now unclear how the correlative relation between the master and the slave is related to the correlative relation between the subject and the object of *jouissance* that the slave produces. Note that, in the discourse of the master, there is no *hypokeimenon* supporting the slave's status as a slave, the *objet a* functioning as what we might call a *hyperkeimenon*, that is, an overlying subject of predication. Kant resolves Aristotle's difficulty by identifying the *hypokeimenon* with the transcendental subject and the *hyperkeimenon* with the transcendental object. This enables him to distinguish empirical and transcendental levels of the master's – or dogmatist's – discourse. Just as he derives his fourfold table of categories from the fourfold structure of Aristotelian judgment, so he could in principle derive Lacan's four quarters from the division of the subject-object relation into empirical and transcendental levels. S_1 would then stand for the empirical subject, S_2 for the synthesis of the manifold, $\$$ for the transcendental subject, and a for the transcendental object = X (cf. Cutrofello 1997, p. 86):

$$\frac{\text{empirical subject}}{\text{transcendental subject}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{synthesis of the manifold}}{\text{transcendental object}}$$

The dogmatic empirical subject determines an object by subsuming the manifold under a concept. This is legitimate in the case of concepts of understanding, but illegitimate in the case of ideas of reason. By indiscriminately challenging all of the dogmatist's knowledge claims, the skeptic undoes the manifold's empirical synthesis and so destroys the unity of the object. In the indifferentist's discourse the synthesis of the manifold – common sense – assumes the position of the master, thereby displacing the role played by the empirical subject in the constitution of knowledge. By replacing the empirical object with the transcendental object, the critic becomes capable of investigating the limits of the subject's ability to synthesize the manifold. In the second *Critique*, the critic determines the capacity of pure reason to motivate the will. The sadomasochistic tendencies that come to the fore in the second *Critique* are already latent in the first *Critique* in Kant's phantasmatic attitudes toward the queen and the mother. Yet just as the analyst differs from the pervert in enabling the subject to traverse its fantasy rather than persist in it (Žižek 1993, p. 72), so the critic does the same by exposing reason's dialectical illusions – while allowing them to be recast as practical postulates.

It is just these practical postulates that Lacan refuses to countenance when he insists that the four discourses are not the Ouija boards of history, that “[i]t is not necessarily the case that things always happen this way, and that things rotate in the same direction” (Lacan 2007, p. 188). Is this not a decisive difference between the analyst's discourse and the critic's discourse? Perhaps an answer to this question can be found once again in Plato. In the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger introduces a myth in which the current age of Zeus is distinguished from the previous age of Cronus. During the age of Cronus, the course of the cosmos was supervised by the gods, and everything moved in the opposite direction from the way it moves today. People advanced from death and old age to infancy and birth. In other words, everything tended toward a state of decreased entropy. When Cronus and his cronies let go of the wheels of the cosmos there was a brief cataclysm followed by movement in the opposite direction, i.e., toward increased entropy. Such is the age of Zeus, the age that we live in (Plato 1999, pp. 268e-274e). It is our task to resist the law

of entropy, as has been eloquently argued in Mussett (2022) and Dalton (2024). In Seminar XVII, Lacan emphasizes the importance of the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics in the nineteenth century, a discovery that he links to the recuperation of surplus value in capitalism (Lacan 2007, pp. 48-51). Kant did not anticipate these developments. In proclaiming that natural and human history are governed by laws of Providence, he implicitly clings to a version of the mythical age of Cronus (as do dialectical materialists who invoke Ouija boards of another sort). Like Plato, Lacan insists that we live in the age of Zeus. Dolar reminds us that Lacan briefly identified a fifth discourse – the discourse of capitalism – which he thought he could distinguish from the university discourse (and which allowed for direct relations between \mathcal{S} and S_2 , and S_1 and a) (Dolar 2023, p. 15). In Book VIII of the *Republic*, Plato himself identifies five social links in the cyclical decline from aristocracy to timocracy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny. Like Lacan, Plato knew that things don't always move in the same direction, yet like Kant he believed that we need to believe in the attainability of the ideal.

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