

## The Subject of the Quest<sup>1</sup>

Willy Apollon

I will begin our work this weekend with the concept of the *Subject of the Quest*, a concept that is my own, but through which I want to evoke the subject of the Freudian unconscious, which is the true human subject, in opposition to the ego, understood as the subject on the stage constituted by the social link that language defines within a given civilization.

In the context of the situation that *mondialisation* plunges us into, psychoanalysis is the only theoretical and clinical frame where the question of the human subject still has meaning and can be treated accordingly. By *mondialisation* I mean, among other things, the confrontation of civilizations, and not simply what we allude to when we refer to globalization in North America. This will be an important dimension of the discussions we will have this weekend. You will no doubt have the feeling that there is a profound shift in the definition of our frames of reference.

I would like first of all to bring your attention to several dimensions that will structure my intervention. First I want to emphasize the dimensions of the spiritual [*spirituel*], the psychological [*psychologique*], and the mental [*mental*], along with the specific differences between them, in order, second, to confront these dimensions with the stakes of the aesthetic and ethics that sustain the quest that mobilizes this human thing that speaks. I would also like to situate historically these constitutive dimensions of the human, in order to better mark the distinctions and the contradictions that are at the heart of the way psychoanalysis

<sup>1</sup> Text produced for the occasion of the Clinical Days of the Cloud Circle of the Freudian School of Quebec (École freudienne du Québec) in 2017.

functions today.

### *The Speaking Being*

If we are to believe scientists, this thing that speaks (Homo sapiens), the speaking being (Lacan's *parlêtre*), appeared 300,000 years ago. There is something here that not only grabs our attention, but astonishes us: the same scientists situate the historical era when Homo sapiens created language about 50,000 years ago. This requires us to be more attentive theoretically, and especially clinically, to the radical difference between the object of speech and the object of language, to which we will return later.

The astonishment here has to do with the object of speech, which seems to fade if not disappear as language is installed. Language is installed both in the history of humanity and in the life of the child.<sup>2</sup>

What is there to say about this precious "thing" that speaks, to which we immediately attribute taste and wisdom by calling it Homo sapiens [from the Latin *sapere*, "to taste"; "to know"]?

This immediately situates us in the dimension of the Spirit, which is both a distinctive feature of the human and the sign of its appearance. Four poles will structure this spiritual dimension that is specific to humanity, *which must not be confused with, or reduced to, religion* (which humans created only 6,000 to 10,000 years ago).

#### a) A pure mental representation

This being who speaks thus has the capacity to produce a pure representation, one that is not preceded by perception and that therefore requires speech if it is to be accessible to others. This being has the

<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: The fading of the object of speech can be identified both phylogenetically, in the life of the species, and ontogenetically, in the life of the individual.

capacity to represent something that is not perceivable in the environment, or to represent something that is already perceivable in a manner that is so different that the other cannot have access to it except through speech.

b) A creative energy

This capacity to represent the environment [to oneself] otherwise than it is, or to introduce representations that are not perceivable by the psyche,<sup>3</sup> mobilizes energies in the speaking being that are no longer dedicated either to survival or to the being's adaptation to the environment, and that henceforth serve to modify the environment through the creation of these representations. To put it simply, everything that is around us and was not there before we came along was

<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: The term in French used by Apollon is "*le psychisme*." While it is a common term in popular culture to refer to one's experience about a part of oneself that is not body but instead thoughts, emotions, and awareness, or an immaterial part of oneself, Apollon's use of "psychisme" distinguishes it sharply from what he defines in this essay as "esprit." The usual translation of "esprit" as "mind" fails to capture its radical departure from a register of cognition, especially in an age of cognitive and neuroscience. Freud of course schematized what he called the psychic apparatus, with *ego*, *superego*, and *id* in the later development. Freud located the unconscious in the *id* and claimed that even parts of *ego* were unconscious. In the framework Apollon lays out in the present essay, "psychisme" is an adaptive function within the pleasure principle and in the service of survival of the species. Animals thus also have a "psychisme," a cognitive and sentient capacity. One can say, literally, that "psyche" is the object of psychology, but not of psychoanalysis, especially as it is practiced in the *École freudienne du Québec*. As the Greek etymology of "analysis" (from *ana-* "up" + *luain* "loosened") evokes, in psychoanalysis "psyche" is "loosened," to make room for the unconscious, beyond the register of psyche and the goals of biological and ideological reproduction.

created in this manner by us, by those who speak. Speech is concerned both with this non-perceivable mental representation and with the drive, that energy that is diverted from the organism in the creation elicited by this representation that is outside of perception.

c) A desire that goes beyond the limits of the collective and environment

The consequence for the speaking being is that what Spinoza designates as desire, and considers to be the essence of the human, pushes the human being beyond the limits that the environment imposes on the survival of both the organism and the collective. What the being represents [to her or himself] is not determined by the collective, because the other has no access to it except through free speech — which already goes beyond the conditions of the environment. This capacity for pure representation, as Kant would say, makes the being transcend both his or her existence and his or her membership in the collective.

d) An irrepressible and unknown quest that transcends the being's very existence

This transcendence that desire makes surge up in the speaking being — the *parlêtre* — plunges the being into a quest that is as unknown as it is irrepressible and for which neither the being's existence, nor the existence of the group, can serve as limits. Freud recognizes (in his own way) this transcendence of the unconscious quest that inhabits the human with the concept of the death drive.

### *The Spirit, the space particular to the spiritual*

From the very beginning, therefore, there has been a space that is specific to the human, which the ancients designated as the spirit. I main-

tain this concept. This space that distinguishes *Homo sapiens* from other hominids is first of all characterized by speech, which is the sign of *Homo sapiens*' power of representation and creation. This space cannot be reduced to the psychological, which it subverts in childhood and puberty, but neither can it be effaced or repressed by the mental space that language creates for adolescence or by religion, which scientists seem to think that speech precedes by many hundreds of thousands of years in the history of evolution.

With the surging up of the speaking being there is a veritable effraction of the psyche, which had itself already existed for millions of years. But what interests us here is, first of all, the fact of this effraction of the psyche in human childhood. What the dynamic of the spirit effects in the child as a consequence of this spiritual space does not seem to be manageable by the psyche, which itself develops according to the rhythms of the maturation of the nervous and endocrine systems and especially of the brain. The result is that there are a certain number of situations where the child must live in an unforeseen solitude with this effraction by the spirit of a psyche that is still being formed. It is this set of situations that we must consider, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, as childhood properly speaking: infancy, the time when it does not yet speak.

### *The Psyche*

Fundamentally, when we consider the psyche in psychoanalysis we are talking about a set of mechanisms linked to the limbic and the immune systems, which articulate the individual to his or her group, immediate environment, and the environment of the group. This articulation of the individual to the group comes about through situations that jeopardize both the survival of the individual in the group and the very existence of the group in its environment. And when the speaking being — the *parlêtre* — surges forth with its capacity to represent otherwise both his or her link to the group, and the very existence of the group outside

of its environment, the psyche experiences an effraction not only of its function, but of its very structure.

Indeed, the psyche establishes limbic and immune limits in the relationship of the individual to its group and environment. The spiritual space of the quest of desire breaks with the limits of the psyche. Underestimating this effraction that subverts the structural relationship of the being to both the group and the environment leads to all sorts of confusion between the psyche and the spirit, which are different ways of denying the experience of real castration that is at the very heart of the speaking being.

We are dealing with such kinds of confusion today, in the clinic and in theory, and it is urgent that psychoanalysis bring some clarity, given what mondialisation is already forcing us to confront. The child is confronted with this effraction in the solitude of his or her lived experience because of the amount of time that is required for the brain to mature with respect to the creativity of this human “thing” in him or her. Also it is important that this contradiction encountered by the child’s eyes and ears, determined as they are by what the child already represents as human and confronted with the perception and consciousness that sustain the parental discourse in the language of the child’s culture, be considered and treated with finesse. Something there risks imposing itself on the child as a prohibition on what can be said, insofar as what is said still has something to do with speech. Indeed, what the subject of speech, the speaking being, has to say, does not have much to do with what can be perceived, just as the object sought by his or her gaze does not seem to have anything to do with what the world of adults has to offer. This contradictory experience, the effect of the effraction, opens a space for the child where the fantasy will come to lodge itself like a foreign body in the psyche, provoking a symptomatic immune reaction that our psychologists and psychiatrists have such a hard time managing clinically without recourse to pharmacological interventions.

The effraction of the psyche by the spiritual space that is opened up by this human “thing” that speaks — which seeks a space for the object that already haunts the child, founding his or her desire for some-

thing else — already takes the child outside the limits of psychic space. The child thus has the same irreducible experience that for tens of thousands of years has already marked the humanity that came before the child, giving rise to creations whose impact we cannot yet imagine.

### *The Aesthetic*

In its double dimension of the feeling of the beautiful and the feeling of the sublime, which are already taking form in the little speaking being — in the *parlêtre* — as the structure of his or her spiritual space, the aesthetic becomes the only recourse that the child has in this situation, where he or she is alone with the effraction of the psyche as it is still being formed. It is common for psychiatrists and doctors to underestimate the solitude of the human being, which is the experience of all humanity, and which is here reexperienced by the child. The aesthetic comes to compensate for the effraction of the psyche by substituting the feeling of the beautiful for the loss of the limits of the limbic system, and by substituting the feeling of the sublime for the loss of the limits of the immune system.

The feeling of the beautiful structures the spiritual space and allows desire to be arrested by those forms that are preserved, thereby ensuring the continued presence of this creativity. Beyond the limits of the limbic system the beautiful articulates the individual to forms that transcend the limits of his or her existence. Beyond the immune defenses that protect the survival of the living being, the feeling of the sublime articulates the individual to the group in dimensions that transcend his or her own existence — and even, in certain cases, the very existence of the group — in order to articulate the individual to the human as such. The feeling of the sublime is constitutive of the collective, and solicits the individual beyond his or her very existence in order to promote the human. The aesthetic thus promotes a beyond of the limits of the individual as the space of the spirit, thereby defining what is specific to the human in its difference as an objective that is unknown, but absolute.

## *Language*

Some 50,000 years ago, according to what scientists tell us, humanity created language, imposing new limits on its own creativity to ensure both its survival in new conditions of existence and its creativity in its profound quest.

From that point onward, a mental space promoted by language imposed itself on the human spirit through a control of the aesthetic, which allowed for the development of, and new achievements by, collectives. This phenomenon corresponds to what we will here designate, from a clinical point of view, as symbolic castration, which is specific to the installation of the collective. Real castration, on the other hand, refers to the effraction of the psyche, and is thus concerned with the installation of subjectivity as such.

Four dimensions that are opened by the creation of language will characterize this mental Space.

- a) Language as such structures the social link, defining the possible relationships between the members of a social group so that the group can become a collective.
- b) It does this through nomination, which creates and imposes a shared reality.
- c) In doing this, language produces consciousness. Indeed, in the social group, from this point on, reality is what is sustained by nomination and by consciousness. The structure of space-time for each member of the group is delimited by this reality. That which is not named, which therefore does not fall under the sanction of language, but is a lived experience of the being



that could eventually be named and made part of reality, will belong to the preconscious.

d) Regarding this reality and the consciousness that confirms it for each person, language poses the Other as a limit that is absolute, yet at the same time internal to the Collective: guaranteeing this reality against the pure representation that takes the being out of the Collective.

The mental space that is created in this way with language ensures that the Collective maintains its grip over the creative power of the individual and controls the individual's spiritual space, which can then be mobilized in creative enterprises whose scope is greater than that of an individual creation.

With respect to the real castration represented by the effraction of the psyche and its effects on this spiritual space where the quest of desire is at work in the speaking being, especially for the child, language represents a symbolic castration that prioritizes shared reality over subjective representation and collective consciousness over feeling, thus articulating the individual to the collective. Any such situation where reality takes priority over representation causes the autistic person to withdraw: but it does not leave others indifferent, either. This symbolic castration, whereby culture censors the feminine through a sexual montage, is at the heart of the stakes of adolescence, where one must create a way to articulate the subjective quest of desire to a concern for the human within the undertakings of the collective, after the traversal, in puberty, of all the consequences of the real castration that the effraction of the psyche by the quest of desire represents.

### *Civilization*

The efficacy of the mental space created by language depends not only on the control of the pure representation in the speaking being — the

*parlêtre* — but on the limitation of aesthetic feeling. This is very precisely what every civilization undertakes. The oldest information we have about civilizations comes from 25,000 or 30,000 years ago. Analyzing this allows us to make two observations. The first is that a civilization is founded on beliefs, and the second is that civilization exerts a veritable affective formatting upon its members in order to ensure the efficacy and permanence of these beliefs.

We can therefore say that all civilizations promote beliefs whose ultimate goal is to control the pure representation in the individual. Once these beliefs are decreed, or simply named, they determine a collective reality that radically orients consciousness. For the individual, it constitutes a risk of the highest order to deviate from this reality or from collective consciousness. Belief within a civilization thus defines the frame within which, for an individual, a pure representation is receivable. It is thus the very field of the action of the spirit that belief aims to enclose and control. It is important, both in the psychoanalytic clinic today and in the context of mondialisation, to take the constraint of civilization into account, where beliefs are presented that sustain the fantasies and the dreams of patients. The beliefs that support the structure of the Jewish social link are not the same as the beliefs that found social relationships in a Shinto society. The collective representations through which these beliefs are expressed orient the consciousness of reality for the individuals in these civilizations in ways that are quite different.

It necessarily follows that what I have described as an affective formatting functions to guarantee the limits through which the mental space that is overdetermined in this way will constrain the action of the spirit and control the quest of desire. For a given civilization, taking into account the beliefs that sustain the social link, the formatting of the limbic system will have the double effect of limiting and orienting the feeling of the beautiful in the development of the individual. What is considered attractive, or what provokes a reaction of fear, will necessarily have a profound link to the founding beliefs of the social link and will limit the feeling of the beautiful in the individual. In the same manner, the formatting of the immune system with respect to the founding

beliefs of the social link ensures the control of the feeling of the sublime in the way in which it sustains membership in the collective.

By controlling and limiting the aesthetic through an affective formatting, a civilization encloses the action of the pure representation and the quest of desire in the feminine. All the members of the collective come out of women's wombs and they depend during the first years of life on this quest of feminine desire and on the pure representation that sustains this quest in the woman beyond the frame of the reality established by language. The existence of the feminine thus constitutes a challenge at the very heart of the enterprise of civilization. The *montage* of the sexual, as a means to control and repress desire in a civilization, organizes itself both around and against the stakes of feminine jouissance. The history of witchcraft, which is still to be worked through, will always be there to remind us of this.

### *Cultures*

Cultures are the expressions of civilizations in different circumstances and geographic contexts. They produce the norms, prohibitions, and models that are necessary for achievements and productions that are specific to the civilizations they give expression to.

In general terms, cultures act on collectives and produce the norms and prohibitions necessary to maintain beliefs and the affective formatting they require. In this way, cultures support and strengthen the reality produced by the civilization, and reinforce collective consciousness against the subjective representation of the quest of desire.

Cultures thus produce the models that simultaneously define and mark out the limbic and immune limits that affective formatting imposes on the expression of the beautiful. In certain civilizations religious practices sustain beliefs in order to control, in the individual, the feeling of the sublime that links the individual to the collective.

In all cases, the practices of the cultural control of the aesthetic that function to link the individual to the collective pass through the

structure that links the ego to ideals and to the superego. But with mondialisation the weakening of ideals will reinforce the link to the superego.

### *The Subject of the Quest*

The history of the subject of unconscious desire is in a sense structured on the model of the history of humanity. The dates that I borrow from scientists do not really matter. What is important is to mark the force of the differences between the structures that are in play. The child, in his or her private experience, struggles with the stakes of speech as they are determined by the way that his or her civilization regulates the child's relationship to real castration, or to the effraction of the psyche by the quest of desire. The adolescent must face the reality of the social link where he or she must create a specific aesthetic space for what in the quest escapes the limits and controls of culture, which will allow the adolescent to articulate him or herself to the future of the human beyond the stakes of civilization. In the context of mondialisation, psychoanalysis is led to think the quest of desire not only in the specific space of a civilization but from the perspective of the becoming of the human as the concern of unconscious desire for every subject.

The quest of desire that institutes the human subject in its capacity to create its own space in which to live and to participate in the achievements of the collective, is imposed at the moment of real castration, where this quest transcends the limits of the psyche. This is undoubtedly one of the dramas of childhood to which the autistic person testifies. The reality imposed by language in the civilization leaves a part of this quest untouched, which, beyond symbolic castration, escapes communal consciousness and subverts the life of the adolescent for whom desire will follow paths that diverge from those established by the expectations of culture. The adventures and the impasses of the young pervert, like the impossible hopes of the young psychotic, tell us much about this subject.

This untouched part of the quest and of human creativity that thus escapes the controls of civilization and the limits of culture constitutes the real object that maintains, at the heart of the speaking being, the irreducible desire to create something else. An analysis establishes a space for the speech that sustains this quest, beyond the stakes of civilization, in service to the human and to the future of the human in collectives.

### *Ethics*

The intimate responsibility that the subject feels for this untouched part of humanity that he or she carries as an unconscious quest requires a subjective space of expression that articulates the person as a subject to the destiny of the collective. In these new spaces that the quest of desire requires, and where nothing is planned or anticipated within the frame of the civilization or culture, the freedom of the subject has no other guide than the aesthetic that has allowed the subject to take a certain distance from the reality of the social link. The aesthetic point of reference that is the feeling of the sublime articulates the subject of desire to the concern for the human in the collective, beyond the immune reaction of an ego that is captive to the social link. Taking responsibility for the becoming of the human in oneself and participating in this becoming in the collective becomes, for the subject of desire, an ethical beacon that sustains the aesthetic that nourishes the quest of the subject in everyday life.

*Translated by Daniel Wilson*

**Willy Apollon** is a philosopher and a psychoanalyst. He was born in Port au Prince, Haiti, and he lives and works in Quebec City, where he has developed, with a few colleagues, analysis for psychotic individuals and founded “The 388,” a related center for treatment that gives psychoanalysis the central role and aims at enabling young adults to participate in social life as free citizens. He defended his doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne in Paris under the supervision of Gilles Deleuze, subsequently published as *Le Vaudou: un espace pour “les voix”*, by Galilée in 1976. In 1977, along with humanities colleagues and graduate students from Université Laval, he founded the non-profit organization GIFRIC: the Freudian Interdisciplinary Group for Research and Critical and Clinical Interventions. In 1997 Gifric created the *École freudienne du Québec* [Freudian School of Quebec], which now includes circles in Quebec, the United States, and Puerto Rico. Some of his essays in English have appeared with those of his colleagues Danielle Bergeron and Lucie Cantin in edited volumes such as *After Lacan*, edited by Robert Hughes and Karen Ror Malone (SUNY Press, 2002), as well as in the journals *differences*, *Konturen*, and also *Umbra*, the former journal of Buffalo’s Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture.