The purpose of this paper is to explain Lacan’s conceptualization of the human situation in general in order to provide an appropriate framework for Lacan’s theory of language. Lacan’s theory of the human situation is based on the following four premises.

1. The Human Situation is Dominated by Psychopathy
2. Psychopathy is a Function of the False
3. Truth is Central to the Human Situation
4. Language is the Institutionalization of Psychopathy

1. THE HUMAN SITUATION IS DOMINATED BY PSYCHOPATHY

In every culture there is a conventionally prescribed, or normal, conceptualization of the human situation. The normal theory of the human situation. And normal people in every culture accept this normal theory of the human situation. Indeed, accepting the normal theory is an essential part of what it means to be normal.

In our modern trans-cultural culture the normal theory of the human situation is conventionally characterized as “the scientific theory”, and is opposed as such to what are supposed to be “other” points of view, non-scientific points of view. These other points of view include the various religious points of view, various mythological and superstitious points of view, etc. In this way, the normal scientific theory of the human situation is set apart from and raised above all of the various non-scientific theories of the human situation. From the conventional point of view.

However, whereas this normal theory may well be scientific, it is not the only possible scientific theory of the human situation, and thus it should not be called “the” scientific theory of the human situation. It is an error to think of the normal scientific theory of the human situation as “the” one and only possible scientific theory of the human situation. And this is the fundamental error in our normal way of thinking, the fundamental error which Lacan seeks to rectify. Lacan’s fundamental point is that there is another way of looking at the human situation, which is just as scientific, or at least, just as valid as the normal scientific point of view. And, given that this other way is “other” than the normal scientific theory of the human situation, it is necessarily an abnormal scientific theory of the human situation. And yet Lacan argues that this abnormal scientific theory is a better scientific theory, a more adequate theory empirically and pragmatically.

1. I am using the word “psycho-pathy” in its etymologically underlying and more general sense to mean “mental illness” or “mental suffering” as distinct from the more narrow sense it sometimes is intended to have in the technical discourse of psychiatry where it refers to mental illness that involves antisocial behavior. In fact the distinction is hard to maintain because all mental illness involves antisocial behavior on some level: The inability to relate with other people adequately is a characteristic symptom of mental illness.

2. The word “normal” (etymologically akin to “know” and “ignorant”) has become ambiguous as between “statistically most frequent” and the underlying sense of “conforming to a standard.” I am using the word in the underlying sense sense. And as far as the human situation, qua human, is concerned, the only relevant type of standard is convention. So in the present context, “normal” means “conforming to conventional standards.”
The basic premise of the conventionally dominant scientific point of view is that everything is governed by the laws of physics. And from this premise it follows that all other points of view and all other modes of explanation, in so far as they are valid, can be reduced to the point of view and the modes of explanation of the science of physics. Reasoning thus it is normally assumed that the sciences that study human beings, such as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, etc., are subordinate to the sciences that study living beings in general, i.e. biology, and that biology is subordinate to chemistry, and that chemistry is subordinate to physics. Thus the predominant theoretical perspective in our modern scientific society holds that the human situation is a function of the biology of the human body as that body interacts with its physical environment, and the biology of the human body and the physical environment and the interaction between them are all at bottom governed by the laws of physics. To put it in more concrete terms, the prevailing assumption is that the human situation is not essentially different from the monkey situation, or for that matter, from the tomato situation, or the rock situation. Thus in the currently prevailing world view, the normal world view, it is commonly believed that we can explain even the most unusual features of the human situation, cannibalistic perverts like Jeffery Dahlmer (who killed his lovers and then made love to them and/or ate their most precious body parts) on one hand and the Bolshoi Ballet on the other, in terms of the same laws that govern the behavior of rocks. In sum, it is assumed that the laws of physics govern all phenomena. It is just a matter of working out the details.

Lacan takes a point of view that is in conflict with this view. However, that does not imply that Lacan rejects the validity or the importance of physical laws in relation to the human situation. Obviously, if a large rock were to fall on you and kill you, or even if it just gave you a concussion and a headache, that would be an important event. That would be something we would want to understand so that we could avoid it whenever possible. The same is true of other potential physical causes of physical ills, including airplane accidents, and diseases like cancer and polio.

So without rejecting the importance of the physical, Lacan holds that there is another realm of phenomena over and above the physical that is of importance to human beings, a realm of phenomena that is beyond the laws of physics. This other realm of phenomena is manifest most importantly in the human realm in the fact that human beings suffer from an other type of ill, a uniquely human type of ill, which we commonly call “mental illness,” or in more scientific terminology, which is to say in foreign words, in this case Greek, “psychopathy.” In other words, in addition to the various physical ills to which the human being, like apes and tomatoes, are victim, human beings are also subject to a uniquely human type of illness, mental illness, from which neither apes nor tomatoes suffer. Moreover, whereas the normal human being is only sporadically troubled by physical ills, the normal human being is chronically plagued by mental ills throughout his life.

This human type of illness is manifest in myriad specific varieties (phobias, fetishes, obsessions, delusions, etc.). And it is also manifest in a general form which has been talked about in terms of “free floating anxiety,” “existential anxiety,” or “alienation.” Further, this human type of illness not only causes pain and suffering on the mental level, but it also causes many different types of physical ills (such as result from accidents, from intentional violence, from over or under eating, from eating or drinking the wrong stuff, etc.), and it also exacerbates ills that are basically of a physical origin (such as diabetes, heart disease, etc.). Here I am alluding to the mixed category of ills that are commonly referred to as “psychosomatic.” Finally, it should be borne in mind that even though we do not suffer directly from a particular type of mental illness, things often work out in such a way that we suffer from the mental illness of the other human beings around us. This latter point has been memorialized in various common sayings such as the following: “Mental illness is the one type of disease that you can suffer from even if you don’t have it yourself.” So, whereas all animals, and all other living things, including human beings, suffer in various ways at various times from the many different species of physical ill, only the human animal suffers from this characteristic human type of illness, mental illness, psychopathy. And the human animal suffers from this mental ill not just occasionally, but endemic, generically, chronically.

Therefore, Lacan reasons, whereas this generic human type of illness might not be the most important aspect of human nature in some ultimate metaphysical or ontological or epistemological sense, as a practical matter of everyday life, in terms of the brute currency of confusion and suffering on one hand as opposed to peace of mind and pleasure on the other, there is compelling motivation to regard this special human type of illness as the central and most important characteristic of the human situation, and to try to understand the human situation as pathological, and to try to alleviate the suffering. In short, whereas human psychopathy may not be the central characteristic of the human situation philosophically, it is the central characteristic pragmatically. Human psychopathy demands attention. And not just as an abstract fact about the human situation. Our suffering demands our attention.
Thus Lacan is led to frame the human situation not in the conventional way as *Homo sapiens*, man the wise, but as *Homo pathos*, man the sufferer.

Following Lacan we will try to develop our understanding of the human situation on the basis of this “new” frame of reference. But before we proceed, we must see how the old conventional idea of *Homo sapiens* fits in the new frame of reference. That is, we cannot simply abandon the idea of *Homo sapiens* as if it were simply false, because it is not simply false; it is false in some sense, but it is also true in some sense. It is true that the human ape is by far the most sapient of apes. And yet the human ape is also by far the stupidest of the apes. So the conventional idea is not simply false, it is complexly false. To be specific, in order to make sense of this paradox, we must frame the falsity of *Homo sapiens* in terms of the logic of duplicity, the logic which I want to suggest is at the heart of the psychopathy which we are trying to focus on here, a kind of logic which I will try to clarify in the following discussion.

As a preliminary way of framing the idea of *Homo sapiens* in the context Lacan’s thinking I suggest the following. Given that the human animal is *Homo pathos*; and given that the conventional point of view persists in (or, perhaps it is not too much to say, subsists on) ignoring the entire pathological dimension of human life; and given that the conventional point of view is institutionalized, as we would expect, in the conventional institutions of society, such as the various bureaucratic institutions of government and law and education; and given that the conventional point of view is also institutionalized in the sciences of physics and biology, and also in the supposedly humanistic sciences of linguistics and psychology and anthropology, and even in the supposedly therapeutic sciences such as religion and psychiatry; given all of these facts, one can only regard the conventional framing of the human being as *Homo sapiens* to be some sort of irony, a kind of conventional joke.

But, whether one takes the idea of *Homo sapiens* as a joke or not, one must somehow deal with the fact that it is perfectly obvious to everyone, to the merest child, that there is something very wrong about our idea that we human beings are sapient. That there is something wrong with this idea is subversively celebrated in various deviant modes of expression. For example, there is the old fairy tale, the Emperor’s New Clothes, about the collective fraud that was uncovered by the child who could plainly see that the emperor was really naked and thus that emperor’s new clothes were fantastic, no more than sheer fabrication. This point is also manifest in the fact that most ordinary humor makes a mockery of the conventional idea of *Homo sapiens*. Take the character of Al Bundy, for example, or any other situation comedy on TV. And this is also the point of view of the human situation that is taken in much of classical literature. I mention the apposite example of Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*.

But even if we do take the conventional idea of *Homo sapiens* as a joke, we must also bear in mind that jokes are ambivalent. As characterized in the traditional image of a two-edged sword, a joke cuts both this way and that way. So, if we hold that the idea that the human animal is *Homo sapiens* is a joke, that is not the same as holding that it is not true. The point underlying Lacan’s thinking is not simply that the human animal is not the sapient animal, but that the sapiens of the human animal is mixed up in and tangled up in and clouded over and dominated by the generic confusion and suffering. In this regard the human animal is schizophrenic: he is both *Homo sapiens* and *Homo pathos*. Or to put it in English, the human animal is split-minded, he is two-minded, and that two-mindedness is the very logic of confusion that mitigates his sapiens, and consequently is the root of his suffering. So to be quite precise about his two-mindedness, about the problematic relationship between these two dimensions of human being, sapience and pathos, the point is that *Homo sapiens* is colonized or enslaved by some mysterious force that subverts his sapiens and causes him to believe things that are false and thus causes him to do things that are contrary to his own self interest and this leads to his suffering. Thus the human being is *Homo sapiens* first and *Homo pathos* subsequently.

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3 “Pathos” borrowed from Greek *paqj*, used in modern English as in “pathetic” to mean “deserving of pity”, but I am using it in the original sense as “suffer.” (By the way “suffer” is borrowed from Latin “sub-ferre” literally “under-bear” or in colloquial English, “undergo.”) Thus “psycho-path-ology” means literally “mental-suffering-logic,” which can be paraphrased as “the logic of mental suffering,” which is ambivalent as between “the logic which causes mental suffering” and “the logic which makes sense of mental suffering.”

4 I put “new” in quotation marks to indicate that it is not true, at least in the normal sense. The idea that psychopathology is the dominant characteristic of the human situation is not new to Lacan. For one thing, everyone knows that Lacan got the idea from Freud. But the idea did not originate with Freud either. It has a much more ancient and universal provenance. This idea is the central tenant of the Bible. It is central to Plato’s characterization of the human situation in the allegory of the cave. And the first teaching of the Buddha is called “The Four Noble Truths” and the first of the Buddha’s truths is that human situation is dominated by suffering.
It is very important to bear this relation of priority in mind as we try to sort out the human situation here. That is, in keeping with conventional modes of thought, one might suppose that the two characterizations are equal and that one could just as well posit either as the prior. But the relation of priority is intrinsic to the logic of duplicity in accord with the fact that truth is intrinsically prior to falsity. I will try to make it more clear below how the logic of duplicity is integral to the dynamic of human psychopathy. But for now let me just assert that in keeping with the logic of duplicity, Lacan’s basic idea is this: a person, every person, is sapient to begin with and then becomes pathological. Therefore, we must presume that the person, the generic normal human being whose situation we want to understand, is pathological now. And thus, since we cannot go back to the beginning, we must begin to understand the human person in the now. It follows that we must begin with the presumption that the normal human person is dominated by his pathological persona. So we must begin to study the human situation as psychopathological. And then perhaps as we understand and unravel the pathology we can uncover his underlying sapient persona. This is the way Lacan frames the human situation as psychopathological.

Before we move on to the next step in Lacan’s thinking, it would be worth considering a couple of other commonly held, though not conventionally predominant, ways of framing the human situation. The first, which is attributed to Bergson is Homo faber, man the manufacturer. The idea is that, whereas some animals do manufacture some marvelous things, such as the spider’s web, the human animal makes more things and more spectacular things than any other animal. This is the view of human beings that is favored by many anthropologists and others who try to make sense of human beings in terms of a functional analysis of the things they make. From the functional point of view it is held, for example, that people make houses in order to keep out of the rain. People cook food in order to make it taste better and/or to kill germs. Etc. But given the dominance of psychopathy in the normal human situation, one also must suspect in principle that in his persona as Homo faber man is not so much governed by real functional considerations, such as the need for food, warmth, and shelter, as he is by the dynamics of his pathology.

This suspicion is, of course, obviously borne out by the evidence. For example, if we cook food to kill germs, then why do Lao people cook women after they give birth, and why do accountants cook the books? Another example: it is obvious that very little of the industrious fabrication of human beings is functional, especially in our modern highly efficient industrial societies. By way of example I will mention two words: exercise machines. Or, diet food. Much has been written arguing, persuasively, that modern man, particularly the modern American man, is precisely Homo faber gone mad.

But it is important to realize that this Homo faber gone mad is not particularly modern nor is it unique to so-called Western cultures. The institution of the potlatch as it was practiced by the Kwakuitl tribe of the northwestern coast of America is commonly cited as the apotheosis of the disfunctionality of Homo faber. And examples of such seemingly pointless sacrifice are not at all rare: the pointless sacrifice of fabricated goods, or of our own good, or even of life itself, is a fundamental element of the perverse logic of Homo pathos which can be seen throughout all cultures of the world. It is through the logic of sacrifice that Homo faber is governed by and works for Homo pathos. Homo faber has, like Homo sapiens, been colonized by Homo pathos. The good of both Homo sapiens and Homo faber is enjoyed, or at least consumed, by Homo pathos.

Finally, in concluding this section, I would like to mention the characterization of man as Homo ludens by Johan Huizinga. In his delightful and insightful study of the human situation as a function of play, he argues that, as paradoxical as it might seem, the persona of Homo pathos, and his colonization of Homo sapiens and Homo faber, come about as a function of the logic of play. Thus, if it is true that the way in is also the way out, it would seem that Homo ludens, who does not work for anyone, quite the opposite, must be the antithesis of and the antidote to and the defense against Homo pathos.

2. PSYCHOPATHY IS A FUNCTION OF THE FALSE

If we consider the human situation as Homo pathos, man the sufferer, we are naturally motivated by the nature of suffering, our own suffering, to want to understand and to alleviate the suffering. This desire gives rise to the following questions: What sort of thing is this mental suffering? What is the logic of this psychopathy? In a word, what is psychopathology? How does psychopathology relate to other types of pathology? And how does it relate to other types of -logy? What causes it? How does it work? And most of all, to what sort of therapeutic measures does this psycho- type of pathology answer? What is the cure? Or is there no cure?

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5 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the following is the first occurrence of the words in English: “1911 A. Mitchell tr. Bergson’s Creative Evolution ii. 146 We should say perhaps not Homo sapiens, but Homo faber.”
So the first step in trying to understand *Homo pathos* is to try to understand what sort of thing psychopathology is, to locate it phenomenologically, and to frame it in relation to the other type of pathology. And the way to do that is to consider the symptoms of psychopathology so as to ascertain how they are different from the symptoms of other types of pathology. To be more exact, following in the commonly accepted method of medical research, the scientific method, we must take the symptoms of psychopathology as signs which, if we can manage to read them correctly, must necessarily point back to their origin and thus reveal their phenomenological provenance.

Unfortunately, because psychopathic symptoms, psychopathic signs, are such a chaotic and incoherent tangle of phenomena (and non-phenomena, such as delusions, hallucinations, fantasies, etc.), it is a forbiddingly complex and confusing process to try to read them. Fortunately, we do not have to fight our way through this impenetrable tangle by a frontal assault: we can simply take the lofty vantage point afforded to us by Lacan’s point of view, and when we look down at the tangled landscape of psychopathic symptoms from that point of view, we can easily make out the general shape of things. So the question is, what is Lacan’s premise as to the aetiology and phenomenology of psychopathology?

I have not found anyplace in Lacan’s writings where he states his premise as to the aetiology and phenomenology of psychopathology explicitly. However his premise is clearly implied in virtually every page of his texts. By way of setting out Lacan’s premise, I will state what I believe to be Lacan’s premise explicitly, then I will briefly illustrate how this premise is implicit in his texts.

First, Lacan’s premise is that psychopathy is a function of believing in the false. Lacan holds that the normal human being experiences persistent and systemic psychopathy because the normal human being persists in clinging to the normal system of beliefs, and the normal system of beliefs, the conventional system of beliefs, is systematically false. As a function of holding systematically false beliefs, people come to be governed by a system of policies and practices that is in conflict with reality, which leads people to behave in ways that are systematically in conflict with reality, and to behave systematically in ways that are in conflict with reality is psychopathology.

Thus *Homo pathos* is a function of false beliefs.6

It should be made clear that this premise positions psychopathology in a phenomenologically distinct realm from the sort of pathology that is normally considered to belong to the sphere of the medical profession. That is, this premise sets up a distinction between pathology that is a function of falsity and pathology that is a function of physical causality. The medical profession, under the influence of the conventional scientific point of view, which is to say under the influence of the normal, has tended to focus entirely upon the realm of physical disease, physical cause, and physical cure.

Given this focus, the medical profession has no right to claim to have any special understanding of psychopathy, because the medical profession has excluded truth and falsity from its universe of discourse. On the contrary, it is a matter of common knowledge that medical doctors are extraordinarily oblivious, even disdainful, of the entire realm of psychopathological phenomena. The medical doctor typically considers psychopathology to be biological pathology that we have not managed to figure out yet. So as we proceed to inquire into the nature of the particularly human type of pathology, there is no reason to grant to the medical point of view the sort of privilege it usually arrogates to itself. When it comes to psychopathology, it is not a question of the nature of chemicals and biology, but of the nature of falsity, which is to say, a question of the interplay between falsity and truth.

Now let me briefly illustrate some of the ways in which this premise is implied in Lacan’s texts. First, it is clearly implied in the descriptions and vocabulary of psychopathic symptoms. In this regard, the same premise is implicit in all discussions of psychopathology. To call something a “hallucination” or a “delusion” or a “fantasy” is to imply that it is false. And to say that someone is obsessive or phobic or paranoid is to assert that their behavior is systematically false. As a function of holding systematically false beliefs, people come to be governed by a system clinging to the normal system of beliefs, and the normal system of beliefs, the conventional system of beliefs, is systematically false. As a function of holding systematically false beliefs, people come to be governed by a system of policies and practices that is in conflict with reality, which leads people to behave in ways that are systematically in conflict with reality, and to behave systematically in ways that are in conflict with reality is psychopathology.

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6 One might suppose that this theory implies that all people are equally pathological, but it does not. In Lacan’s view, there are normal people, i.e. people who hold normal beliefs (normal being defined in relation to a particular society), and normal people experience normal types and normal degrees of psychopathology. And then there are abnormal types and abnormal degrees of psychopathology, which Lacan would explain as being a function of abnormal types of false beliefs and abnormal degrees of false beliefs. Thus in Lacan’s worldview normal falsity leads to normal pathology, whereas abnormal falsity leads to abnormal pathology. In his view the relation between normal and abnormal does not correspond with the relation between true and false. Truth is intrinsically abnormal in that it is utterly beyond the realm of conventional law, which is the norm. And whereas some of the false is normal, some of it is abnormal. And both the healthy personality and the very sick personality are abnormal, the former because it is a function of truth, which is abnormal, the latter because it is a function of an abnormal degree or type of falsity.
Take the example of obsessive behavior illustrated by Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth. She was observed in a kind of sleeping/awake state: her eyes were open, but she was walking around as if awake, but she also acted as if she were in a dream state. Specifically, she rubbed her hands together as if she were washing her hands while muttering, “Out, damn spot.” Apparently she was hallucinating a spot of blood on her hands, which she took to be a sign of her guilt in murder. But her washing did not work, so she had to wash again, and again, and again. And her washing did not work because there was not really a spot there. She only hallucinated the spot. So her behavior is psychopathic because it is governed by a falsity. It is at odds with reality.

Or consider the type of pathology known as “phobias,” certain varieties of which are quite normal in modern American society. For example, it is normal in our society for people to have what is commonly called an “irrational” fear of snakes and spiders. Strictly speaking it is not that such fear is “irrational,” but that the degree of fear is inappropriately excessive in relation to the realistic danger posed by the object of fear. There is a displacement of affect from one thing to another. People substitute one object of fear for another. People are realistically afraid of something, which for some reason they do not want to consciously recognize, so they falsely attribute their fear to snakes and spiders. And what is more, such people often recoil in great fear from the mere mention of the word “snake” or “spider.” And in the same manner, all of the words that refers to psychopathic symptoms imply that psychopathy is a function of falsity in one way or another.

Going beyond the basic vocabulary of psychopathology, Lacan describes virtually every aspect of what we commonly think of as essential to the human situation as being false. For example, the term “ego” has become (via Freud) a common word in English meaning the self. And when we speak of the self we normally mean the human self, because it is normally assumed that animals and other lower orders of living beings (such as tomatoes) do not have a self. Now Lacan consistently defines the “ego” as an imaginary thing, which is to say, a fiction, a falsity. What more Lacan considers the ego not only to be itself a fiction, but to be the root of the systematic misunderstanding of everything else that is characteristic of human beings.

Of course, the word “ego” is the Latin equivalent of the English word “I”, the first person pronoun, the word which I use to refer to myself, as if there were two things, self and I. And, according to Lacan, that which “I” refers to is indeed another thing, but that second thing too is, according to Lacan, a falsity. But not the same kind of falsity: The first (ego) is an imaginary falsity, the second (I, the subject) is a symbolic falsity, a distinction which I will explain below. Thus according to Lacan what we consider to be the essence of our humanness, that which we think of as our identity, is a two layer falsity, a falsity on top of a falsity.

Indeed, according to Lacan, the very logic of identification, the process by which both ego and I come into being, is intrinsically paradoxical. This is obvious: to say that “A is identical to B” is to hold that two different things are the same. But if there are two things, then they cannot be the same. And if there is only one thing then identity cannot be predicated of it for identity is a relation between two things. Thus to believe a predications of identity is to believe a falsity.

These few examples will suffice to illustrate my assertion that the premise underlying Lacan’s texts is that the psychopathology that dominates the human situation is a function of believing in the false. I have demonstrated that this is the case on the level of specific psychopathic symptoms, such as the hallucinatory perception of blood. I have demonstrated that this is the case on the level of general psychopathic tendencies, such as the false assessments of danger which is phobia. And, I have demonstrated that this is the case on the level of the most general and deepest elements of psychopathology, such as the predications of identity that generate ego and subject.

3. TRUTH IS CENTRAL TO THE HUMAN SITUATION

If the human situation is dominated by psychopathology, and if psychopathology is a function of the false, then, because the false arises from the true, it follows that truth is central to the human situation.

To put it another way, if we want to understand the human situation, then we must understand the psychopathology of the human situation. And if we want to understand psychopathology, we must understand it as a function of falsity. And if we want to understand falsity, we must understand it as a function of truth. Therefore, in order to understand the human situation, we must look at it as a function of the interplay between falsity and truth.

So, if one is willing to grant the two premises I have already posited (1. The Human Situation is Dominated by Psychopathy and 2. Psychopathy is a Function of the False), then one ought to be willing to accept this third premise. However, I have found that many people, even Lacanians, are willing to grant the first two premises, and yet balk at this third premise. This is evident by the fact that Lacanians usually write the word in quotes—“truth”—as if it were not quite legitimate. Or use it with a qualifier—his truth or the truth of desire—as if there were no such thing as just plain truth. I suggest that this is so because there is in the human mind a deep and pervasive irrational
antipathy to truth, to which even Lacanians are subject. And I suggest that this antipathy to truth is not incidental to the present line of reasoning: it follows logically from the preceding line of argument that an antipathy to truth must lie at the heart of the psychopathy that dominates the normal human situation. In other words, psychopathy is a function of an antipathy to truth. Psychopathy is antipathy to truth. Therefore, antipathy to truth is normal. Antipathy to truth is the very foundation of the normal human mind.

This explains why it is that in polite society, we not only tend not to speak about truth, but we tend to speak of the false only indirectly. For example, it is ok to say that someone is stretching the truth, or exaggerating, but it is impolite to say that someone is lying. In this regard, truth is like sex: it is constantly on our minds, and we all enjoy playing with it, but we dare not do it right out in plain sight. It is too dangerous, too powerful, too good. And it is utterly beyond the boundaries of the conventional. And it defies every effort to conventionalize it. That is why the slang expression, “Doing the wild thing,” is such a strikingly apt name for sexual intercourse. It is because it is the wild thing that it poses a threat to, indeed, it mocks, the sovereignty and validity of the conventional. Thus the conventional universe of intercourse strives to eradicate the wild universe of intercourse. And thus it is impolite to come right out and admit that under our clothes there is naked sex and that under the fabric of our social intercourse there is naked truth.

So it seems that if the function of truth in human pathology is covered up even slightly by being described indirectly in terms of falsity, people find it easier to accept. However in the present context we cannot get by with a prefabricated characterization of the pathological dimension of the human situation. We must be clear about how the human situation is oriented in relation to truth: truth is the center of gravity of the human situation.

So, although it is contrary to the normal conventional world view, we must accept the fact that there is such a thing as truth. And we must realize that it is not as if this is something new to the Lacanian frame of reference, or to our everyday lives. As I said above, when we use such words as “fantasy”, “hallucination”, “ego”, etc. we are taking a position in relation to the things so named on the ground of truth. That is, when we call something a “fantasy” we assert that it is false, and in doing so we presuppose truth. As we make our way through our everyday life we are constantly judging the truthfulness of everything we see and hear. What is more, as I will try to make clear below, the very ontology and logic of language is a function of truth. If this is so, then whenever we talk and think we are engaged in the play of truth and falsity, and thus we are playing in the gravitational field of truth. These brief observations illustrate the fact that truth is central to the human situation.

In spite of the ubiquity of truth, and in spite of the fact that Lacan holds that truth is central to the human situation, in keeping with the normal world view and with normal practice, discussions of Lacan’s theory of the human situation rarely mention truth. Or they speak of some sort of contingent truth, such as the truth of the subject, or the truth of desire, etc., as if there were no truth except these contingent truths. It might be supposed from the brief observations illustrate the fact that truth is central to the human situation.

But it is in relation to truth that the signification of everything which is expressed is to be located. So speech, as much taught as teaching, is located in the register of the mistake, of error, of deception, of the lie. (Seminar I, p. 260)

the sign, just of itself, can only present and sustain itself in the dimension of truth. Because, in order to deceive, speech affirms itself as true. (op cit., p. 263)

the real problem is that of error... (and)... It is clear that error is only definable in terms of the truth. (op cite p. 263)

I must emphasize the fact that Freud progressed on a course of research which is not characterized by the same style as other scientific research. Its domain is that of the truth of the subject. The quest for truth is not entirely reducible to the objective, and objectifying, quest of ordinary scientific method. (op cite p. 21)

...the true remains so much outside that Descartes then has to re-assure himself - of what, if not of an Other that is not deceptive, and which shall, into the bargain, guarantee by its very existence the bases of truth...I can do not more than suggest the extraordinary consequences that have stemmed from this handing back of truth into the hands of the Other (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, p. 36)

One can say right off that the search for a way, for a truth, is not absent from our experience. For what else are we seeking in analysis if not a liberating truth? (Seminar VII, p. 24)

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7 This is the crime—seeing it—that was committed by the naive child in the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes. What is it that the child is naive about, that he is ignorant of? He is ignorant of the fact that there is a social contract, a social conspiracy, to not see truth, or at least not to say that you see it.
In one of those occasionally confused discussions in the course of which a group, our own, found itself tossed this way and that midst its eddies, and individual, one of my students, felt himself obliged...to say that the meaning of my teaching would be that the veritable import of the truth is that one can never get hold of it...What an incredible misinterpretation! What childish impatience! (Television, p. 95)

The following are a similarly random sample of statements that speak to the same point gleaned from writings of some of Lacan’s disciples.

The problem of ontology is not to identify oneself in language, so much as to learn that language has distorted experience. (Ragland, 1987, p. 154)

(Discussing a slip of the tongue) While in most cases a person who just made a slip would probably endorse the following statement, “I just made a random, meaningless goof.”, Freud’s retort would be “The truth has spoken.” (Fink, p. 4)

No one ever speaks without at the same time saying, “I speak the truth.”...I can say nothing without positing it as true. (Jacques-Alain Miller in the preface to Lacan’s Television, p. xx)

And I cannot resist adding the following quote in which Freud himself states that truth is what is in play in psychopathology.

If the perception of reality entails unpleasure, that perception—that is, the truth—must be sacrificed (SE 23, p. 237)

Finally, let me add that one of the characteristics of truth is that it manifests itself. Thus the relation between the true and the false is that the false strives to hide the true, with limited success, for the true is manifest in the very fabric of the false. Thus the fact that the human situation is centered upon truth is not merely an abstract principle, but is a force which imposes an intrinsic dynamic on the structuration of the human mind, a kind of gravitational force which shapes the space of mind into an essentially asymmetrical dynamic space like that of the physical space in which we live. This asymmetric dynamic of truth has been observed and celebrated since ancient times in the literature of many cultures. In one common trope truth is likened to the light of the sun and falsity to clouds which temporarily hide the light from our eyes.

And in speaking of this characteristic of truth, Lacan said many times: “It speaks.” For example:

the truth is grounded in the fact that it speaks (Science and Truth p. 16)

And in this same essay, Lacan explained that this “it” in “it speaks” is the same as the “es” (German for “it”) of Lacan’s mantra “Wo es war, soll ich werden” (which Lacan got from Freud, of course). But truth never speaks directly. Truth is silent. It is undisturbed. And even if it wanted to Truth could not possibly speak directly, for to speak is intrinsically an indirect, mediated, mode of relationship. For this reason speech presupposes division, indeed, two divisions, but truth is one. Thus truth speaks, but not overtly. Only surreptitiously through the medium of language in the structure of the gaps of language. It leaks through in the guise of the gaps. And the structure of these gaps is the structure of what linguists call “markedness.” And the structure of markedness is the structure of language. Thus truth makes itself manifest in the very shape of language regardless of who speaks or what they say, regardless of whether they intend to speak the truth or to lie. In short, the very substance and structure of language presupposes truth, and in doing so, conveys it. Thus as Lacan put it in one of his most powerful aphorisms, whenever I think I my self am speaking, it is really

I, the truth, am speaking... (op cit. p. 15)

In summary, Lacan’s premise, and my premise, is that truth is the ground and the gravitational center of language and thus of the human situation. And remember that what is at stake here is not just the ability to understand the human situation, and not just the ability to understand language, but more importantly, what is at stake is the ability to address the human type of suffering therapeutically. If believing in the false is the cause of the human type of pathology, then truth is the antidote. Thus truth is not only central epistemologically, but it is also central pragmatically.

4. LANGUAGE IS THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF PSYCHOPATHY

Once again, in keeping with his tendency to speak obliquely, Lacan never explicitly said that language is the institutionalization of psychopathology. But this view of language is integral to his theory of language, which we will outline in the next section. And it is also integral to his theory of psychopathy. In his various texts he explains

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8 This quote came to my attention because it was cited by Fink (1997) p. 7.
how it is that the false beliefs that underlie one or another sort of psychopathy are institutionalized in the very form of language, are engendered in children by language, and thus are passed from generation to generation in the medium of language. And he also assumes this premise in trying to explain how it is that language can serve, as for example in the psychoanalytic practice, when it is used right, as a means of curing psychopathy. In other words, if there is a “talking cure”, then there must be a talking disease, and vice versa.

A note of caution. The idea that language is the institution of psychopathy invites one to jump to the conclusion that language is the cause of psychopathology, but we must take care not to do so. Let me state it explicitly: Language is not the cause of human pathology. And yet language is not entirely innocent either.

As this premise states, the distinctively human type of sickness is institutionalized in language, embodied one might say, in symbolic form. And so language is complicit in conveying and engendering and nurturing and promulgating and celebrating the pathological modes of human being. But the etiological role of language in this uniquely human type of pathology is more on the order of sympathetic magic, or seduction, or lure, or felicitation, than that of cause in the sense of physical causality. So language is the institutionalization of psychopathy, but it is not the cause of psychopathy.

However, we must bear in mind that we are not focusing here on Lacan’s theory of psychopathy, but on Lacan’s theory of language. So it is time that we turn away from the focus on psychopathy and turn to his theory of language. But before we do, by way of preparing the ground for that discussion, let me preliminarily explain now what I mean by “institution.”

To create an institution is to create a symbolic entity. I will define more precisely what I mean by “symbolic” below, but in the meantime we can use the word in the ordinary sense. In the ordinary sense, a symbolic thing comes into being, into the special type of being that symbolic things enjoy i.e., virtual being, by virtue of a stipulation, or an agreement, or a convention.

It is commonly supposed that in order for something to be symbolic it must necessarily be considered to be symbolic by a group of people. That is, shared by a group of people. Or, to put it the other way around, it is commonly supposed that an individual cannot make up his own symbols. But that is not so, unless you are willing to grant that an individual is already a group of people. And this is not such a strange idea when you consider that, as Freud said, whenever you interact with someone, their mother and father are always present in the back of their mind. And Lacan adds a fourth person to the structure of the individual, which he calls, as in the French name for the dummy in the game of bridge, le mort. So if we can think of an individual person in this sense as a group of personas, we can retain the notion that a symbol is the creation of a group.

Given this way of thinking about the so-called individual, any group or subgroup or any individual can establish a symbolic institution. For example, The Rat Man, who was the subject of one of Freud’s case studies, stipulated that rats will count as florins in his personal symbolic economy: for him a rat counts as a florin. But of course no one else knew about or shared this symbolization of rats. Another example: A group of four people playing poker can agree that certain plastic chips will count as dollars in their temporary collective economy. Another example: In the English language we agree to count either the pronunciation [kar] (as in Midwestern English) or [ka:] (as in Boston English) as an instance of the word “car.” In the United States pieces of paper with certain distinguishing marks will be counted as legal tender, i.e. money. Thus rats, plastic chips, the word “car”, and the dollar have been established as symbolic institutions in their respective symbolic universes of discourse.

But in truth, rats are just rats, plastic chips are just plastic chips, sound is just sound, and paper is just paper. Thus seen on the level of truth, all symbolic institutions are established in the realm of pretense, or in other words, in the realm of falsity. And it is in this sense that the preeminent medium of symbolic institutionalization, language, is the institutionalization of the systematic falsities that constitute the realm of Homo pathos.


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9 Given this, what we call an individual in ordinary language is not really individual, but rather is dividual into several component personas.