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Agalma: Commentary on Session X

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Lacan begins the session right where he ended the last session, with the word “agalma,” which many in his audience apparently didn’t quite catch. Someone in his household (his daughter Judith?) knew what it meant: an ornament or a piece of jewelry. While this is technically correct, Lacan thinks it only scratches the surface of what the Greek word is expressing. For him, it seems to be a topological concept (more on this to come), and he suggests that we should think a bit more about why one would ever want to “bejewel” oneself in the first place.

The appearance or use of this word marks a pivotal point in *The Symposium*, for it appears when Alcibiades, “the actor who changes everything” emerges.¹ Recall that the “game” of the night had been to take turns praising love. Alcibiades says: With that finished, why don’t we praise the person sitting to our right? The person sitting to his right happens to be Socrates himself. Lacan notes: The topic of the symposium changes from

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praising love to praising the other. He reminds us at this point of what Socrates's quasi-analytic interpretation of Alcibiades's praise of him will be at the end of Alcibiades's speech: Alcibiades says what he says about Socrates in order to make an impression on Agathon, who was at the time the true object of Alcibiades' desire.

The function or role of the other in the speech by Alcibiades is very different from what is found in the speech Socrates gave (with Diotima). There, Lacan notes, it was all about love as a "dyadic relation"—one proceeds "toward love" through a series of different identifications, driven by beauty, ultimately up to the Sovereign Good itself.² (This point will be important for his critique of "oblativity" and "genital love" later in this session.) In Alcibiades's speech, we see a more symbolic, triple relationship at work—either because of the Alcibiades/Socrates/Agathon triangle or the one involving Alcibiades/Socrates/Socrates's *agalma*). Again, the concept of "*agalma*" is key.

Lacan claims that Alcibiades is going to try to "unmask" Socrates and basically obtain from him a sign of his desire (what Lacan will discuss in a later session of the seminar as the "real presence" of desire—an erection). Recall the speech by Pausanias in which it was asked what we seek in love: The claim was that what we look for is that which is desirable. Well, we get a rather different, more graphic take on that question from Alcibiades!

As Alcibiades describes him, Socrates is a Silenus-like figure, ugly on the outside, but he contains riches. And this "topology" of Socrates (inside/outside) is crucial for understanding what the *agalma* is about. Lacan notes the extreme passion of Alcibiades's speech: Alcibiades doubts that anyone has any idea what is at stake in desire. But he has seen what Socrates has—the "*agalmata*," the little statues that are described as divine, golden, and totally beautiful, and he says that once one has seen them one can only do everything that Socrates orders!

Lacan makes a couple of notes here: No one tells us what the *agalmata* are exactly. They're supposed to be little statues of the gods, but this is obviously a metaphor. What is it that Socrates has, really, that causes such desire in others? And two, why do they have the effect that they do? Here Lacan reminds us of his "Che Vuoi?"—a sort of magical, imposing speech by the Other that puts us under its terrifying spell.

At this point, Lacan breaks off his commentary on Alcibiades's speech to explore the concept of *agalma* in more detail, looking at how it was used in other ancient Greek texts. In the play *Hecuba* by Euripides, Lacan argues that the word "*agalma*" cannot correctly be translated as jewelry or ornament, for it is about "the *agalma*" of a god's pain. What is called an "*agalma*" here is in fact a palm tree that was planted and grown as a testament to this. And indeed we should think of this as a phallic object, Lacan says. Very much playing the role of a Heidegger with Greek words here, Lacan is trying to point out a "hidden accent" in the word "*agalma*" that is missed when it translated, even "correctly" as jewelry or as statues of gods. Lacan wants to say that the term "always emphasizes the fetishistic function of the object" in question.³ This is indeed something we would not think if we came across it as "ornament" in a translation. Then Lacan discusses fetish objects in religions and how they differ from icons or images, which are mere "copies" of the god. A fetish object, however—for example, one upon which one pours all sorts of liquids—is an object with special power.

In his exploration of the etymology of the word "*agalma*" Lacan highlights things such as admiration, envy, pain, seeing, and even a link to the good (*agathon*) which, in Plato's *Cratylus* (a dialogue dedicated to word origins) is linked to what is admirable. But despite all this, Lacan focuses our attention back to how the *agalma* is linked to images, and to a specific type of image described in Homer, in whose work "*agalma*" is used as a word for a statue that is meant to attract the eye of the goddess Athena. Lacan: "Agalma appears as a kind of god trap. There are things that attract the eyes of those real beings known as the gods."⁴ Or as a "charm"—the Trojan Horse in the *Iliad* was considered one as well. Lacan says he could give us a thousand examples of such uses of the term "*agalma*."

What is at stake, what is being thought here, is, Lacan announces, the function of the partial object. This was one of psychoanalysis' great discoveries, but too quickly psychoanalysts wrapped it up or distorted it into a "dialectic" in which it was supposed to develop into a "total" object: a desire or love for the whole person. Lacan is referring here, critically, to the idea that we should understand the oral, anal, and genital "stages" as a progressive series of stops on the way to normalization. Lacan points out that even a total other, the goal of "oblativity" (giving to the other,

selflessly), the ideal and normative object of desire, is maybe just a bundle of partial objects in truth. This is rather different from being a truly “total” (integrated, well-formed, distinct) object! Lacan reminds us here of his criticisms of the “genital ideal” or type. In particular, he wonders: If the genital type, the ideal of “genital love” is somehow modeled after the genital act, does this mean that in love we are trying to bring or give the other satisfaction? Do we care about the other’s satisfaction, or are we (rather dubiously) trying to perfect the other?

Lacan is suspicious of the idea that it is better that our beloved be treated as a subject rather than an object. He makes a rather good joke here: If it is bad to consider the other as an object, it is even worse to consider the other to be a subject! The point is maybe a bit dense, but Lacan is saying that among objects, one can be compared to another, and could be considered as good as another... but when it comes to subjects, the problem is that other subjects are not sufficiently other for us. We presume they possess the same “combinatory” as we do, that they express themselves in “articulated language” and that the other-subject can “respond to our combinatory with its own combinations.”⁵ In other words, as subjects we take others to be part of our symbolic system: They speak like us, they are split by language as we are. And so, as a result, they are subject to the same conditions we are, insofar as we are split subjects.

What does this mean for love, then? What does it mean that such others are ones we love and also objects of our desire? It means that the object of desire in this case is not an object like those that can be put in a series of equivalences, in which one is as good as another, etc. “The psychoanalytic object is the something that is the aim of desire as such, the something that emphasizes one object among all the others as incommensurate with the others.”⁶ This is also what is called the partial object. So is Lacan saying that what is lost when we treat others as subjects in love is their potential incommensurability?

An interesting aside follows, in which Lacan rants a bit about philosophy and psychoanalysis—however, I think he would also include the “genital love” enthusiasts in psychoanalysis in the former camp. His point is that such metaphysical and moral discourses about other-directed love and behavior seem “weighty and noteworthy” because of the ambiguity of the terms they use, in contrast to mathematics and by implication the sciences

(and perhaps Lacan's own version of psychoanalytic theory) which can use "signs with an unequivocal meaning because they don't have any meaning" (consider barred-S, a, i(a), A, etc. etc.).⁷ The metaphysicians in philosophy and psychoanalysis get tripped up when talking about relations between subjects and objects because of ambiguities, because of a lack of precision.

But if there is a special partial object at stake in desire, and it impassions us in a particular, incommensurable way, it is because "hidden inside it is agalma, the object of desire." And it is the role of this object in desire and fantasy that Lacan will continue to focus on.

Lacan closes with a reminder of the issues he has with oblativity, as well as how objects have been conceived of generally in psychoanalysis. The function of the object is clearly important for psychoanalysts, especially in the work of Melanie Klein. She and her followers can even be seen to correctly have articulated the function of the agalma at the beginning of things, "before any dialectical development" (of desire/love into a love of a true, whole other, etc.) with their good/bad object split. But what often follows from this is a sort of theoretical temptation to develop one object in particular into a sort of sovereign Good Object, neglecting the persistent role of the agalma: an object beyond compare, something "we find in a being only when we truly love."⁸ And thus, getting something fundamental about desire wrong.

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*. ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p. 136.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Reference

- Lacan, Jacques. 2015. *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller and Translated by Bruce Fink. Cambridge: Polity.