

Choang-tsu's Butterfly: Objects and the Subjective Function of Fantasy

Calum Neill

In the sixth chapter of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan refers to the Taoist Choang-tsu's well known parable of the dream butterfly. Choang-tsu poses the question of how, after waking from a dream of being a butterfly, he can tell whether he is Choang-tsu who has woken from the dream of being a butterfly or whether he is the butterfly now dreaming he is Choang-tsu. This article argues that Lacan's treatment of the parable allows us to discern two instances of fantasy; the fantasy of being the butterfly and the fantasy of being Choang-tsu. These two instances help to demonstrate the centrality of the process of identification to the function of fantasy and allow us to grasp an ethical dimension entailed in one's subjective relation to the object(s) of fantasy.

From the mirror stage, we can understand the seeds of fantasy in the subject's self-relating as *méconnaissance*. That is to say, in mistaking the wholeness perceived in the mirror as a wholeness attributable to itself, the subject establishes the fantasy of itself as an image, or what Lacan terms the ideal-ego. Central to this process of (mis)identification is the mechanism of seeing and, inseparable from this, being seen. In the terminology of later Lacan, this is elaborated under the concept of the gaze. Through his discussion of the gaze as *objet petit a* in *Seminar XI* and, in particular, through his treatment of Choang-tsu's famous paradox of the dream of the butterfly, Lacan allows us to apprehend what we might call the properly subjective function of the fantasy.

Waking from a dream in which he experienced himself as a butterfly, Choang-tsu poses himself the question of how he can be certain that he is

now himself, Choang-tsu, and not the butterfly dreaming that he is Choang-tsu. Put simply, Choang-tsu's dilemma can be phrased as that of how we can know which self is the "real" or authentic self and which self is an illusory, "invented," dream version. This should also, perhaps, remind us of the classical Cartesian quandary as to how he, Descartes, can know he is not dreaming when he is "in fact" awake (14). Where Descartes, to an extent, circumvents this problem, leading to the conclusion that, even if he is the dream version, this in itself is indicative of a real Descartes beyond the dream insofar as the dream "copy" necessitates an original from which it is abstracted (15), Lacan's treatment is a little more involved. For Lacan, Choang-tsu is correct to pose himself this question for two reasons. First, taking such a question seriously indicates that one has not fallen so under the sway of the master signifier as to have foreclosed one's own division; that is, one does not assume that one is adequate to one's perceptions of oneself. In fact, one does not assume one is one: "When Choang-tsu wakes up, he may ask himself whether it is not the butterfly who dreams that he is Choang-tsu. Indeed he is right, and doubly so, first because it proves he is not mad, he does not regard himself as absolutely identical with Choang-tsu" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 76).

In addition to this, the question Choang-tsu poses to himself holds within it a certain truth of Choang-tsu. In a sense, he is the butterfly. The butterfly, in Lacan's reading, cannot be reduced to some mere chimera, an arbitrary construct of Choang-tsu's dream-state. On the contrary, it is as dream butterfly that Choang-tsu was able to grasp something of his own identity, namely "that he was, and is, in his essence, that butterfly who paints himself with his own colours" (76). For Lacan, it is through this penetration of the unconscious that something of Choang-tsu can emerge, as opposed to some social construct or status known as Choang-tsu. This can be reformulated in terms of the relation of the subject to the signifier. What we have in the parable of Choang-tsu are two signifiers, "Choang-tsu" and "butterfly." The subject, in the proper Lacanian sense, of the parable is that which is represented between these two signifiers. Phrased otherwise, the subject of the parable is placed under these two signifiers:

Choang-tsu butterfly

∃ ↓ ∃

It is, however, actually only in the movement between them that the subject proper emerges.

The difference here, for Lacan, between the dream and "reality" is at-

tested to by the mechanism of representation. In the dream the subject is represented as a butterfly, thus confirming something of his subjective apperception. Outside the dream, the subject is represented as Choang-tsu but feels it necessary to question this representation. This logic of uncertainty is in itself what points towards the subjective truth of the situation. As a butterfly, the subject does not pose the same question as when he is awake: "when I am not this dream butterfly, when I am awake, am I actually this dream butterfly?" Lacan's explanation here and thus his conclusion is that, as dream butterfly, the subject is but his own representation whereas as Choang-tsu, he is a social representation:

when he is the butterfly, the idea does not occur to him to wonder whether, when he is Choang-tsu awake, he is not the butterfly that he is dreaming of being. This is because, when dreaming of being the butterfly, he will no doubt have to bear witness later that he represented himself as a butterfly. But this does not mean that he is captivated by the butterfly - he is a captive butterfly, but captured by nothing, for, in the dream, he is a butterfly for nobody. It is when he is awake that he is Choang-tsu for others, and is caught in their butterfly net. (76)

The point we can extract from Lacan's reading of this parable is that the subject, \exists , cannot be reduced to either instance; neither butterfly nor Choang-tsu. Neither, however, is the subject properly some entity outwith the two instances. The subject is not the property of, a pure effect of, the symbolic order - here that which is fixed under the signifier Choang-tsu - nor can the subject be reduced to a pure effect of itself (beyond or outwith the signifying realm).

In this sense, following Žižek (46), we could understand the dream (and its content) as the fantasy of the subject wherein the butterfly constitutes the (representative of the) object: (\exists & butterfly). Žižek writes, "In the symbolic reality he was Zhuang Zi [Choang-tsu], but in the real of his desire he was a butterfly. Being a butterfly was the whole of his positive being outside the symbolic network" (46). What Žižek's interpretation occludes is the fact that, despite the impossibility of inverting the terms of the dream/fantasy to which Žižek correctly attests, the parable does contain two instances of fantasy. While only one instance can, as Lacan confirms, be understood as a dream, fantasy is not reducible to dream states - we fantasize when awake and the unconscious continues to pulsate when awake. While clearly, in accordance with Žižek's reading, the butterfly is a fantasized representation of

the subject such that it can be represented as \exists & butterfly, the parable also contains the fantasy of being Choang-tsu; \exists & Choang-tsu. What is significant in the parable in terms of the light it casts on the notion of fantasy is that by raising and posing the question of his own identity and, in Lacan's words, in "not fully understand[ing] how right he is" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 76), Choang-tsu points us towards the impossibility of the subject in either position. The subject is that aphanistic point of its own departure; the subject is nothing but its own division.

In this sense the fantasy embodies a relation to some *thing* or image which functions as the *objet petit a* and thus protects the subject from the (im)possibility of the traumatic encounter with the Real by masking or obfuscating the site of the lack in the symbolic order. At the same time, and in a sense it is but a different perspective on the same function, the fantasy serves to protect the subject from the *jouissance* of the Real by providing a surrogate, fantasized, sense of unity.

Through the mode of fantasy we can perceive the mechanism of desire at work. The *objet petit a*, as that which causes desire, can be understood to stand in for the unity we would wish to achieve. In both scenarios posed in the parable, as we have seen, there is something of an imagined sense of unity at work; I *am* the butterfly or I *am* Choang-tsu. In a sense, the psychoanalytic "reality" is both attested to and negated in both versions - I am neither the butterfly nor Choang-tsu but I am positioned in response to my conceptualization of myself as the butterfly and Choang-tsu. The truth of the subject is the mark of desire inscribed in both fantasies. The Lacanian point here would thus not be that the dream can be equated to fantasy and the waking state could not, but rather that both dream and waking state attest to the same fundamental fantasy, albeit in necessarily different modes.

As noted above, the fact that the Other is lacking points to the necessary or constitutive lack in the subject. In encountering the Other as lacking, the subject should be seen as not so much encountering the void of the Real, but rather that point on the signifying chain which is indicative of the existence of this void. This allows us to understand the subject as resorting to or finding support in fantasy as a veil for this lacking both in the Other, the symbolic field, and in the subject itself. It is as such that the object of fantasy, that in relation to which the subject places itself in fantasy, constitutes the cause of subjective desire and thus constitutes the subject proper as subject of desire. Without the function of fantasy the subject would fail to mobilize itself. That is to say, it would not properly be (a) subject: "in its fundamental use, the fantasy is the means by which the subject maintains him-

self at the level of his vanishing desire, vanishing inasmuch as the very satisfaction of demand deprives him of his object" (Lacan, "Direction of the Treatment" 532). The castration of the subject, the dividing and alienating effect of the symbolic order as it functions at one and the same time to allow the possibility of the subject and to deny the subject the coherence it might (impossibly) have otherwise enjoyed, is attested to in the intercession of Demand. The desire which then arises as one effect of this intercession is caused, set in motion, by the object of fantasy. But this object, attesting as it does to the state before castration, before the intercession of demand, is never actually available to be attained. Fantasy is thus the mode whereby the subject can "flirt" with the (semblance of the) object in a relatively secure manner. In this sense, fantasy can be understood as the provision of a surrogate *jouissance* which, as surrogate, serves to guard the subject against Real *jouissance* by masking the lacking point in the symbolic network which is indicative of the (possibility) of the emergence of the Real.

The relation of the function of fantasy to the symbolic field, that the fantasy is that which covers over the lack in the symbolic and thus functions as a support for the symbolic insofar as the subject relates to it, indicates that fantasy not only offers a certain (illusory) coherence for the subject in terms of his own self-identity but it also confers an equally illusory coherence on "reality" (as it is mediated in terms of the Other). Properly, these should not be understood as two distinct moments. The subject's identity is always symbolically effected and the symbolic reality to which the fantasy lends some coherence is always a subjective representation. The identity thus secured in the mode of fantasy is indicative of the desire both to identify oneself, to "find" or construct one's identity, and to do so in relation to something mediated and structured by the symbolic network.

The fantasy in this sense encapsulates what it is that the subject wants, albeit in a surrogate form. That is, the object standing in for *objet petit a* is never *it* and thus fantasy can and will necessarily move on to another object which will also not be *it*. It also provides some answer to what it is that the Other wants, in the sense that it offers the possibility of an explanation of what it is that the Other is lacking and why it is that the Other is lacking. Again, this is not to suggest that *the* answer is found, that we can actually solve the lack in the Other, but that this lack is obfuscated by *an* (impossible and) illusory answer (Stavrakakis 47, 150-52). It is in this sense, again, that Lacan can assert that it is fantasy which is the support of the desire, not the object (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 185).

Fantasy is thus that within the subject which attempts to shore up both

its own constitutive lack and the lack in the Other. This operation is made possible by the *objet petit a*, that remainder of the Real which insists on the subject, both indicating and serving to mask and protect against the trauma of the Real. Crucial to the logic of fantasy and desire, however, is the impossibility inherent in its operation. Were the *objet petit a*, the object of fantasy, to be attained, the subject would be faced with the very trauma which the fantasy serves to protect it from. It is thus that desire must be understood as a perpetual movement, not in the sense of the drive whose aim is its ultimate goal but in the sense that the object which causes it would, if attained, negate its very own function.

Perhaps the quintessential example of the fantasy would be that of love as original unity as presented in Plato's *The Symposium*. Plato has Aristophanes tell us of how humanity once consisted of three genders, male, female and hermaphrodite, and how each individual of whichever gender was complete in itself through combining what we would now understand as the attributes of two people: four hands, four legs, two faces etc. Due to these creatures' ambition and power, they were considered a threat to the Gods who decided to split each one into two halves. Because, however, each creature had previously formed a whole with its other half, they clung to them and, if separated, searched for them relentlessly (25-28). The myth, as it has come to pass into popular culture, has us each in restless pursuit of our true other half, that other person who would really complete us.

This example illustrates the different functions performed in fantasy. Firstly, it proffers an identity, the answer to the question of who I *really* am; I am really the other half of my lost other half. Secondly, it does so with reference to the promise of a wholeness to come; when I find my lost other half, I will again be complete and everything will be perfect. Lastly, it offers an excuse as to why things are not (yet) perfect, why it is that both I and the world are lacking. Through each of these complementary functions, the fantasy serves to forestall any final resolution. When we do find or think we have found our lost other half, the girl or boy of our dreams, it inevitably turns out that they are not quite the magical *thing* we had hoped for, the world is not suddenly put to rights, nothing is really perfect and thus they cannot be *it* and the hope can continue that the real Platonic other half is still "out there."

Crucial in understanding this function of the fantasy is the appreciation that the fantasy works to situate the subject. The fantasy is not experienced as a passive scene, the straightforward construct of the subject. As evident

in the example of Choang-tsu's butterfly, the fantasy always looks back or, properly speaking, the fantasy embodies the gaze. This can be seen equally in the example from *The Symposium* where the gaze returned from the fantasized conjoining of lost pairs can be understood to situate the subject as not-one. That is to say, the element of self-perception evident in fantasy demonstrates something of the distance between the subject and the *objet petit a*.

This points to one of the fundamental operations of, and thus lessons to be learnt from, psychoanalysis, that of "traversing the fantasy." If, as we have seen, the formula of fantasy ($\exists \& a$) describes the subject in relation to *objet petit a*, this indicates that the fantasy presents the subject in relation to what it would take to be the object cause of its desire. Traversing, crossing over the fantasy, would thus involve the assumption of responsibility for the cause of one's own desire and thus of one's own cause as subject, as without desire the subject cannot come to be. Traversing the fantasy would thus involve assuming a position of responsibility towards (the function of) one's fantasy - that is to say, assuming the role of the cause of desire and thus accepting the perpetual sliding of the *objet petit a*. Put simply, traversing the fantasy entails accepting one's desire for what it is, accepting one's desire as interminably bound to the desire of the Other, and not attaching oneself to the illusory dream of attaining impossible lost *jouissance* "elsewhere." It entails confronting that which the gaze would show, "the essence of the gaze," that we paint ourselves in our own colours (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 76).

±

Graphically this could be represented as ($\exists \& a$): i.e. the subject assuming responsibility for the (object as) cause.¹ It must be kept in mind, however, that such an assumption is never a permanent effect. Desire is in perpetual movement and the subject in question is the barred subject of the unconscious, not some monadic subject of pure being. Thus, the pulsative nature of the unconscious must be accounted for. The subject emerges as pulsation in and through the symbolic realm and it is only thus that the operation of traversing the fantasy can be enacted, as speech:

what's important is to teach the subject to name, to articulate, to bring this desire into existence, this desire which, quite literally, is on the side of existence, which is why it insists. If desire doesn't dare to

1. This should not be confused with ($a \& \exists$), with the subject exchanging places with the object as cause, which would be the formula of the perverse fantasy wherein the subject places itself in the position of object.

speaking its name, it's because the subject hasn't yet caused this name to come forth.

That the subject should come to recognise and to name his desire, that is the efficacious action of analysis. But it isn't a question of recognising something which would be entirely given, ready to be coopted. In naming it, the subject creates, brings forth, a new presence in the world. (Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory* 228-29)

Insofar as the *objet petit a* is, as such, *not*, that which attains to the position of *objet petit a* is always necessarily a functionary of the subject. This is not, however, to suggest that there is something "out there" chosen by the subject which would provide the lost *jouissance* implied by *objet petit a*, but rather that the subject has, in the mode of fantasy, chosen something to function as the necessary surrogate of the object cause of desire. In so naming this desire, and thus constituting it, the subject puts itself in a position to claim responsibility for it. As desire is that which motivates and constitutes the subject, this naming and bringing forth allows the subject to assume responsibility for itself and thus assume a subjective position which is not in thrall to, though it is, clearly, still dependent upon, the Other.

Traversing the fantasy thus returns us to one interpretation of the Lacanian imperative *Wo Es war, Soll ich werden*, "there where it was, I must come to be." It also sheds some light on Lacan's emphasis on desire in his seminar on Ethics when he asks, "Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?" (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 314) or declares that "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" (319).

Wo Es war, soll Ich werden in this context would thus indicate the movement, the traversing, from the subjugated subject of fantasy, wherein the subject is (perceived as) constituted by, caused as subject of desire by, the elusive *objet petit a*, to a position of subjectivity wherein it, the subject, is its own cause. We could thus reformulate the dictum "Where It was, there must I come into being" as "Where the object was (perceived to be the cause of my desire), there shall I come to be (the cause of my own desire)." Such a shift is a radical realtering of the subjective position from which one speaks. It is clear also, however, that such a realtering is and can only be momentary as, in enunciating and thus creating its desire, the subject necessarily does so in the mode of the Other; i.e. language. The function of fantasy persists, the gaze cannot be escaped. The desire the subject brings into existence through its enunciation is necessarily passed over into the realm of the

Other (desire is still the desire *of* the Other), but through the process of e-nunciating its desire the subject can succeed in repositioning itself and thus attaining something of its own.

Here we can see that traversing the fantasy does not entail a “getting over” or moving beyond fantasy in any absolute sense. It is not that the subject who has traversed the fantasy will no longer have any need of such a function. Fantasy is a necessity in subjective life in order to avoid the traumatic effects of the Real and to accept castration. Rather, traversing the fantasy involves the formation or configuration of a new fantasy which allows or reflects the assumption of a “new” subjective position in relation to the Other and the Other’s desire. Such a (re)formation of the subjective position is the moment of *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*, wherein the subject (\exists) assumes a position in that place previously occupied by the Other or the discourse of the Other. Such a moment, the traversing of fantasy, can then be understood to be a moment of (taking) responsibility, a retroactive assumption of responsibility for the position one will have come to occupy. Such occupation and its concomitant responsibility is indicative of a temporalization which resists temporalization. It is not the “despite what has been, I will be” of ego-psychology but rather a reconfiguration of and assumption of responsibility for the very relation of cause and effect which might be taken as having or having been seen to have occurred.

This retroactive positing of the subject’s responsibility is one which occurs within what Lacan terms logical, rather than chronological, time. This points towards an understanding of the relationship between cause and effect which unsettles traditional or received notions of what such a relationship would “naturally” be in any given situation and emphasizes the assumptive and forced qualities of this relationship. Simply put, the uninvested, received notion that A is (and always is) the cause of B in any (comparable) circumstance is put under question: “cause is a concept that, in the last resort, is unanalysable - impossible to understand by reason - if indeed the rule of reason, the *Vernunftregel*, is always some *Vergleichung*, or equivalent - and that there remains essentially in the function of cause a certain gap” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 21).

This logic can also be detected in Lacan’s statement concerning not ceding or giving ground relative to one’s desire. By allowing the relation with the object to pertain in such a way that the object is Other, that is, that the subject finds its cause in something radically external to itself, the subject cannot yet bring itself to be in a properly subjective position. The assignation of cause is always a retroactive and subjective effect. By as-

signing the role of cause to something else, the subject denies itself and places itself under the sway of the Other, albeit in a deluded form. It is only through the subjective assumption of the cause that the subject allows its own possibility.

Napier University
United Kingdom

Works Cited

- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power." *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 2006. 489-542.
- . *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II, 1954-1955*. Trans. Sylvana Tomascelli. New York: Norton, 1988.
- . *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, 1959-1960*. Trans. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992.
- . *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1977.
- Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis. *Lacan and the Political*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.