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Intertexts, Volume 21, Issues 1-2, Spring-Fall 2017, pp. 40-66 (Article)



Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/itx.2017.0002>

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The Subject as Phil Laak

Poker and the Politics of Intersubjectivity

DAVID WITTENBERG

Later in this essay, I will suggest that the game of poker offers a prototype for what we are in the habit of calling, in the structural vocabularies customarily used to express psychoanalytic insights, “the subject.” Politically speaking, the most salient aspect of the subject is its distinction from the self, the individual, the human, and so on—in a word, its nonspecificity or interchangeability, which also lends a pathos to the term’s ambiguity: Is someone the subject *of* political acts, or subject *to* (or subjugated *by*) politics, culture, language, and the law? My choice of poker to elucidate this structure may seem odd, since poker is a game self-evidently concerned more with microeconomics than with politics. Therefore, along with my discussion of one particular poker hand, I will take time to outline more generally the features of poker that underlie its value as an illustration or allegory of political subjectivity. In brief, the poker hand will show why only the subject, not the individual, can play the game in which it finds itself, even as the individual player must continually fail to believe in the extent of that subjugation.

Game theory, for which poker “remains the ideal model of the basic strategical problem” of socioeconomic decision-making, is an obvious rubric for any such analysis, as it also is for most books, articles, and blogs that poker players themselves consult in order to improve their games, some of which I will briefly reference.¹ For my purposes, a second and more crucial rubric is the canonical subsection of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* titled “Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness,” more commonly referred to as the master–slave dialectic, a fragment of

philosophy that, “throughout 150 years” of political and cultural theory, has effectively steered sociological analysis away from questions of either psyche or rational self-interest and toward structural relations of power.² Hegelian dialectic reconfigures the significance of the individual under broader conditions of subjectivity, or to put it more concisely, subordinates the particular to the universal. To offer just one description of how such a political dialectic plays out—a description reminiscent of a Christian ethics to which it is nonetheless radically opposed—Alain Badiou, adapting language from both Marx and Lacan, proposes that “the individual, truth be told, is nothing” and that “it is only by dissolving itself into a project that exceeds him that an individual can hope to attain some subjective real.”³ Touchstones for an objectified subjectivity, or at least its type or tendency, include Marx’s “species-being,” Freud’s “super-ego,” Merleau-Ponty’s “embodied subject,” Althusser’s “interpellated” individual hailed by the state, and so on.⁴ In light of my specific interest in poker, I opt for a less canonical touchstone for the objectified subject, one that connects Hegelian dialectic directly to the terminology of game theory: Jacques Lacan’s 1945 essay “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty,” in which Lacan analyzes an adaptation of an archetypal game-theoretical problem, the “three prisoners” puzzle.⁵

Three Prisoners

The “logical problem” at the heart of Lacan’s essay is presented in the guise of a cocktail party brainteaser and may originally have come to Lacan that way.⁶ A warden (for reasons ostensibly outside the scope of the game) intends to free one prisoner and selects three inmates to compete for this opportunity. The three prisoners are isolated in a room, each with a disk affixed to his back that only the other two can see. The first prisoner able to deduce the color of his own disk and explain his reasoning to the warden will be free to leave the prison. A total of five disks are employed, two black and three white, determining the game’s possible outcomes with a strict binary calculus: if I am the first to deduce the color of my disk, black or white, then I will be freed; if I cannot do so before the others, I will remain imprisoned. The crucial aspect of each prisoner’s deliberation is that, because I cannot observe the color

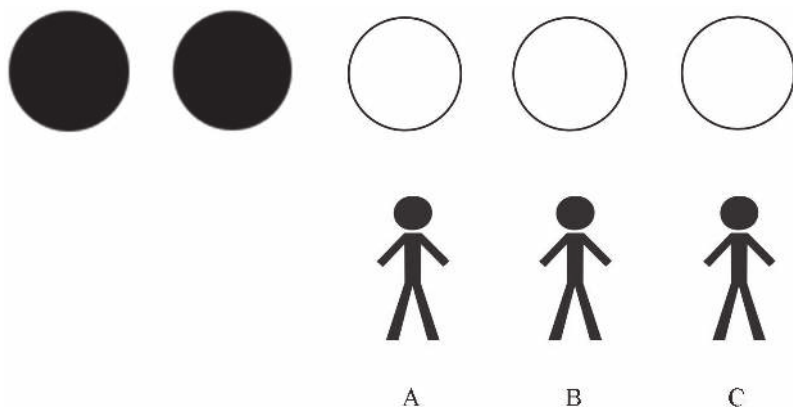


Fig. 1. Three prisoners.

of my own disk—my real subjective identity, so to speak, within the binary parameters of the game—my only recourse is to work out that identity through an analysis of the other two prisoners' behavior toward me. At each step of the game, therefore, a prisoner must gain objective knowledge about the other's perception of *him*, a knowledge that, in the absence of speech, can be attained only by observing the actions the others undertake upon seeing their counterparts' disks. These actions are equally defined by binary parameters, controlled by the imperative to be the first to exit: another prisoner will either move toward the door to leave, indicating he has arrived at a conclusion about the imputed color of his own disk, or he will stay put, indicating he has failed to conclude anything yet.

In the specific version Lacan presents, the warden uses only the white disks, rendering the prisoners exactly equivalent. Knowledge of one's own color—in other words, a logical deduction about one's real subject position in the game, "white"—is therefore acquired as follows. Beginning from the viewpoint of any one of the prisoners—let us call him "A"—I set about reasoning in two hypothetical steps. First, I observe that my companions, "B" and "C," both have white disks on their backs. If I now imagine myself in the position of B, and hypothesize that he (B) had observed me (A) to be black, I realize that B could have surmised that if C, in turn, were also seeing B as black, then C would have immediately

Step 1:
If I (A) were black...
(from B's point of view)

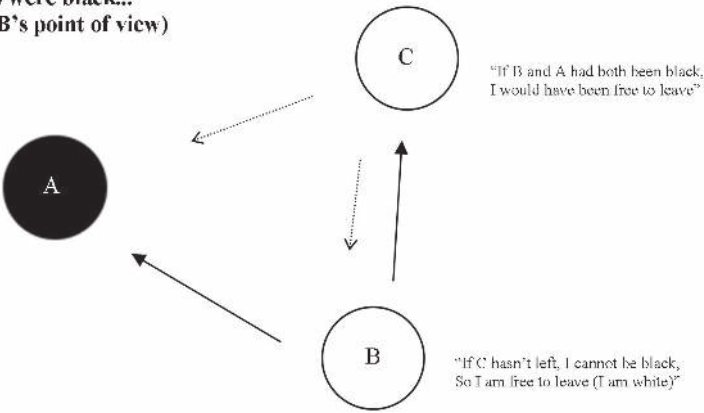


Fig. 2. Deduction, step one.

Step 2:
Since B hasn't left...

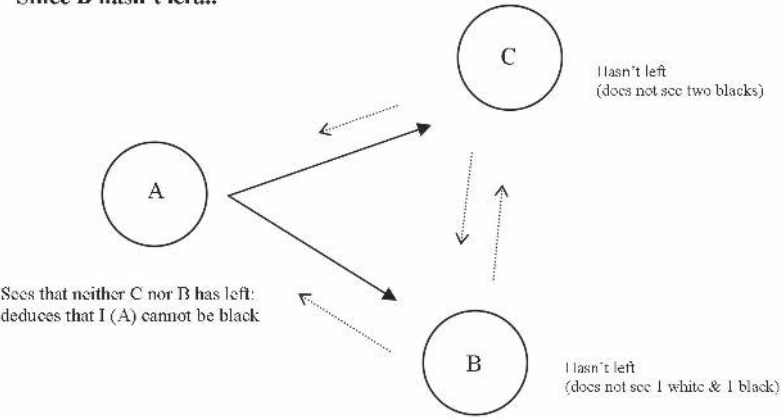


Fig. 3. Deduction, step two.

concluded that all the black disks were accounted for, and he (C) must be white. However, B (I am still hypothesizing from A's viewpoint) must have observed that C cannot have arrived at this conclusion, because C has made no move to leave the room. Therefore, I realize that if I (A) was black, B would have in turn concluded that he must be white, based on his observation of C's nonmovement (i.e., C sees only one black disk).

Hence, step 2: Because B has not moved, I (A) can safely conclude that B does not see me as black, because B clearly finds himself unable to deduce his own whiteness as a consequence of C's nonmovement. In short, I can now be certain, based on B's nonmovement (in turn based on C's nonmovement), that I am white, and so I am free to leave.

The two-step deduction I have outlined is what Lacan ironically calls a "perfect solution" to the warden's puzzle. Because the game reduces the three prisoners to equivalent subject positions, each with a white disk affixed to his back, all are presumed equally capable of arriving at the same logical conclusion, and so "all three exited simultaneously, armed with the same reasons for concluding." In essence, in the "perfect solution," each of the three prisoners is A, whom Lacan calls "the real subject who concludes for himself" and who treats the other two merely as "reflected subjects upon whose conduct A founds his decision."⁷ From a logical point of view, the a priori equivalence of all prisoners within the game's binary constraints—the fact that each is objectively "white"—guarantees their a posteriori equivalence when each subject acts upon his individual deduction by moving to exit the room.⁸

The obvious glitch in this "perfect" solution is empirical rather than logical. The deduction on A's part that he is white, along with his subsequent move to leave, is founded solely upon the *non*movement of B and C. However, since those two are also A, their simultaneous movements toward the door—now in their capacity as "the real subject" who plays the game, rather than as the merely "reflected subject" against whom it is played—destroy the basis for A's deduction. As soon as I see the others move, I must second-guess my own individual conclusion and hesitate. Or to put it another way, it is only in the role of a real subject (A) that I can exit, but in the role of a mere reflector for another (B or C), I am obligated to hesitate and remain behind. Because the conditions of the game inexorably place me in both subjective positions, real and reflected, I still lack the logical foundation for identity.

In effect, I have discovered the error of assuming that I could act as a sovereign individual within an essentially intersubjective scenario, uniquely capable of deciding my course of action based on the objective behavior of some B or C who serves merely to reveal or reflect my own subjectivity. In actual practice—which is to say, as soon as I am

compelled to acknowledge that other subjects are present in the game, acting on their own deductions and in their own interests—my intersubjective situation is revealed to be wholly algebraic or generic, essentially unindividuated. The empirical conditions of logical deduction and resultant action—the real moves that subjects make toward exits or the hesitations they perform following processes of thought—must be taken into account as integral components of deductive praxis, and therefore as defining aspects of one's own subjectivity. Thus it is only in subsequent steps—by incorporating this realization of the generic nature of the three players, based on their hesitations in real time, or, in a word, their *lack* of any strictly distinguished individual sovereignty—that any given A can arrive at a more adequate conclusion as to the precise value (black or white) of his own subjectivity.

The scenario in which A finds himself is the elemental one outlined by Hegel in the master–slave dialectic. The subject initially believes himself to be a “simple being-for-self,” and mistakes the other social actor for something less than fully self-conscious, an “unessential, negatively characterized object.”⁹ The subject therefore overestimates the uniqueness of his position, which naturally appears to him to be qualitatively distinct—in a nutshell, he believes himself to be an autonomous or “individual” A, and the others to be merely generic or unindividuated Bs or Cs *for* him, although in reality all three subject positions in the game are equivalent and interdependent. As Hegel writes, “Each [individual] is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty still has no truth.”¹⁰ A more adequate comprehension of his subjectivity will arrive only over time, via successive iterations of the dialectic, through which the subject eventually learns that he is also fully an object for the other, who is in turn as much a subject as he, equally bound to a reciprocal, intersubjective relationship.

Likewise, in Lacan's puzzle, the prisoner's ineffective “haste” to conclude his individual deduction before he is beaten to a decision by the others must give way to a fuller understanding of the structural equivalence (“white,” thinking, hesitating) of all three participants. Ultimately, through a better comprehension of their mutual *intersubjectivity*—a process equivalent to the subject's reiteration of the immanence of its individuality in Hegel, or, in a word, its “experience”—each player's iden-

tity will be confirmed as “true,” finally permitting them to grasp that they all must be the same subject, “white,” and can leave the room together without further hesitation. Thus, as in Hegel, Lacan’s discussion turns to the question of time, which occupies most of the remainder of his analysis. In order to account for the “suspended motions” of his two companions, each prisoner must integrate the value of “experiential data” into what initially appeared to be a purely formal problem of “classical logic.”¹¹ The implications are severe for both metaphysics and psychology, and a number of excellent critical discussions of the relation between time and logic in Lacan’s essay are available.¹²

For the sake of both my segue to poker and the political argument I will pursue, I wish deliberately to pause at this early stage of Lacan’s discussion and isolate one implication of the game, in the guise of a dilemma that the subject encounters during his initial deduction—the very dilemma that leads to mutual hesitation and productive disappointment among subjects. On the one hand, because each of the prisoners has hesitated, failing to achieve the “perfect solution,” the progress of observation has shown them to be strictly interchangeable within the delimited parameters of subjective self-knowledge furnished by the powers that be. All three are “subjects who are undefined except by their reciprocity,” which is to say, subjects only by virtue of an intersubjective relationship that cannot be fixed in advance but must be renegotiated a posteriori, incorporating empirical experience into logic.¹³ On the other hand, the real political-economic stakes of the game—which is to say, the fact that freedom is gained only when identity is “asserted” and justified in “haste,” before an individual prisoner “allow[s] himself to be beaten to this conclusion by his semblables”—demand that the prisoner adopt “the personal form of the knowing subject who can only be expressed by an ‘I.’”¹⁴ In short, one gains one’s freedom only to the extent that “I” find a way to distinguish and assert the value of my own subjectivity a priori. The result of this dilemma is a kind of pragmatic paradox that sets limiting conditions for the psychology of the subject: I must declare (or “anticipate” the “certainty” of) the fact that “I” am precisely not distinguished individually, but am merely (white) like the others. My individual act is precipitated by my essential *lack* of individuality, a lack that—this is conceptually ironic but nonetheless practically effective—I

eventually assert in the positive guise of (individual) identity. “I” am a (white) subject just like the others—we are all equally “I,” so we can all leave together.

Logical terms compel such a paradoxical-sounding convolution, but in psychological terms, my individuality is better described as a species of fantasy, simultaneously useful and restrictive, constructed through the presumption of a distinct identity amid the collectivity of (equivalent) subjects to which I belong. My “anticipated certainty” of being either white or black is first an *act*—just as “every judgment is essentially an act”—that “precipitates” the (logical) basis for self-identification of which I eventually become certain; as Badiou suggests, “consistency is retroactive.”¹⁵ Thus, as Lacan writes, “the psychological ‘I’ emerges . . . , defin[ing] itself through a subjectification of *competition* with the other,” and only in the guise of an “I” does one become an “empirical” subject capable of acting *first*.¹⁶ Forevermore, the residual tension between the fundamentally intersubjective (reciprocal) attribute of the subject and the empirically distinct (psychological) attribute of the individual will haunt every A in the guise of an uncertainty or (in proportion to the stakes of the game) a fear that he (“I”) may not be able to leave. Indeed, Lacan suggests that the prisoner’s urgency to assert his own subjective value in good or sufficient time represents “the ontological form of anxiety.”¹⁷

In essence, the subject is compelled to decide, prior to any firm logical basis, whether, within the parameters offered by the “wardens” of justice and individual freedom, “I” will be capable of escaping my subjugation by the restrictions of the game I am compelled to play. Ultimately, this is a political question, which is why Badiou phrases the dilemma of Lacan’s prisoner in terms of “courage”—“Victory belongs to the one who gains the upper hand by thinking on the go.”¹⁸ Yet Badiou’s “courage,” like Lacan’s “certainty,” is by no means achievable or effective in every empirical (i.e., political) scenario. There is not always the opportunity, even given sufficient time or logical powers, for second or third “scansions” during which participants in the intersubjective scenario mutually determine their equivalence and therefore their potential to act together as intersubjects. What if, instead, the subject remains stuck in its situation, or the conditions of the game offer no further means

(such as a readable hesitation on the part of the other) to determine truth or a strategy based on truth? I suspect that most games—all the more as they become increasingly political—decline to offer such means. Poker, I am now going to suggest, offers an opportunity to consider the extent to which real sociopolitical scenarios reduce the subject to a mere game *piece*, capable of making only so many (or so few) moves toward an end or exit. In the poker hand I will analyze, what Badiou terms “courage” becomes wholly impractical because subjects are defined much too strictly, or within too few parameters, to permit an effective self-definition or individuation, even a fantasmatic one. Yet this darker scenario may prove to be more politically prescient than the scenario Lacan sets up and Badiou improvises upon.

A Hand of Poker

The hand I wish to analyze was played on a 2009 episode of the television show *High Stakes Poker* between two professionals, Phil Laak and Tom Dwan; it can be viewed in full at a number of internet video sites.¹⁹ The hand includes some extensive “table talk” by Laak, who is known as an especially voluble player. I opt to treat Laak’s discourse as a primary theorization of his own subject position at the poker table, analogous to the reasoning imputed to the prisoners in Lacan’s example. I am aware that some readers may find the poker jargon employed by Laak, Dwan, and the television announcers less accessible than the arcane language used by Lacan, Badiou, or Hegel. I will therefore spend a few moments outlining terms needed to follow both Laak’s deliberation and the progress of the hand. Readers already familiar with Texas Hold’em poker are invited to proceed directly to figure 5, which charts the full hand in a conventional notation.

Texas Hold’em is played as follows. Each player at the table (as few as two and as many as nine or ten) is dealt two “hole” cards, face down. A sequence of community cards is then dealt face up in the center of the table, in three steps: a three-card “flop,” then a fourth card (the “turn”), and a fifth card (the “river”) to complete the “board.” Players make their five-card hand from the best combination of their two hole cards and the five cards on the board, based on the conventional ranking of poker



Fig. 4. Phil Laak and Tom Dwan.

hands.²⁰ Four rounds of betting occur during the hand: preflop, on the flop, on the turn, and on the river. Betting proceeds clockwise around the table, starting with the player seated immediately after the rotating dealer position, or “button.” In most Hold’em games, players in the first two positions (following the button) are obliged to put in forced bets, or “blinds,” before the cards are dealt in each hand: usually, a “small blind” of one half bet in position one and a “big blind” of one full bet in position two. There may also be a predetermined ante required of every seated player. In each round of betting, when a player’s turn arrives, if that player has not yet folded, he or she has the option to bet or check if no other player has yet bet in that round, or to call, raise, or fold if another player has already bet. The minimum bet is the size of the big blind, but because this is “no-limit” Hold’em, there is no maximum except “all in,” meaning a player bets his or her entire stack of chips or cash at that moment.²¹ If all opponents fold before the hand is completed, the last remaining player in the hand wins without having to show his or her cards; otherwise, there is a showdown, and the player with the best cards takes the pot.

In this episode of *High Stakes Poker*, the game is being played with a \$200 ante and blinds of \$400 and \$800, making the pot (for eight seated players) \$2,800 before any cards are dealt. It is important to keep in mind that players on this show are playing with their own money; this is a fully real game of poker, regardless of the television format, a fact crucial for its merit as a socioeconomic example. The hand I will discuss begins with Phil Laak seated in third position, immediately following the two blinds, and therefore the first to act once the hole cards are dealt; holding the jack and ten of hearts (Jh Th), he calls the big blind. Tom Dwan, in fifth position, raises with his pair of eights (8d 8s), and all the other players fold back around to Laak, who calls Dwan’s raise to complete the preflop action. The pot now stands at \$10,800. The chart in figure 5 gives the sequence of the entire hand, although for my purposes the most significant action occurs on the river, when Dwan’s final bet of \$9,400 obliges Laak to make a particularly difficult decision.

Because of the way the betting has unfolded—this is common in Hold’em, if rarely quite so transparent as here—by the time Dwan and Laak arrive at the river, they are both reasonably certain of the relative strength of the cards they hold. From Laak’s perspective, he has made a

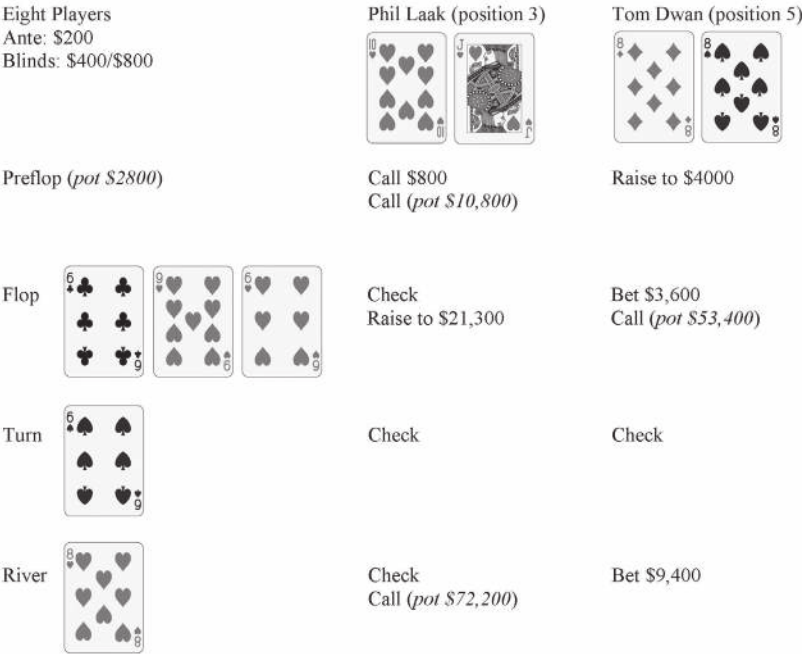


Fig. 5. The hand.

flush, which is usually the best hand he expects to make with his “suited connector” (Jh Th), but he also is aware that Dwan has almost certainly made a better hand, probably a full house, but possibly a higher flush or even four of a kind (“quads”).²² From Dwan’s perspective, he does have the full house and can be confident he is ahead of Laak, but he is also aware that Laak has access to this same information.²³ Therefore, realizing that Laak is likely to fold his (presumed) losing hand to any large bet on the river, Dwan makes a relatively small “value bet” (\$9,400, or about 15% of the pot) in order to induce Laak to call against his better judgment.

Now Laak, despite the near certainty he is losing this hand, finds himself facing a peculiar dilemma. I will quote a good portion of Laak’s table talk, as well as incidental comments by the announcers (A. J. Benza and Gabe Kaplan) and other players, to give a sense of Laak’s slightly giddy deliberation.

Benza: Dwan bets ninety-four hundred.

Laak: Ninety-four

Kaplan: When Phil Laak checked on the turn, Dwan realized he didn't have an overpair.²⁴

Laak: I check-raised 6–6–9, and you called. Then a six came.

Kaplan: He's betting a small amount of money here because I think he's putting Phil Laak on a flush.

Laak: And there's like forty million in the pot. Can you spread it out a little bit? There's twenty-four, forty-eight, there's fifty. You bet four thousand preflop. You didn't notice that I'd limped, I don't think.²⁵ I think you thought I was the big blind.

Dwan: [laughs] He's getting so much enjoyment out of this!

Antonio Esfandiari: It hurts to bite my tongue.

As Laak perseverates through several more minutes, it becomes clear that he feels compelled to call Dwan's bet of \$9,400 regardless of his own certainty that he is losing. The conditions of the game, which always furnish the possibility that a player like Dwan may be bluffing—acting “apparently irrationally,” in game-theoretical terms—oblige Laak to go against what would seem to be his clear self-interest, namely, saving \$9,400 by folding.²⁶ I have identified Laak's discourse as a primary theorization of his subject position in the hand, and indeed, he tells us a good deal about how he conceptualizes the situation into which the game has thrust him, given his understanding both of probabilities and of the type of player Dwan is known to be. Essentially, he is now in the position of prisoner A, striving for an a priori deduction of his subjective identity (either being beaten or being bluffed, in the binary parameters of poker) based on the behavior of the other, but discovering no reliable basis for such a deduction. In the following portion of the table talk, Laak attempts to reason out what game theorists and poker players alike call an “optimal” decision.²⁷ His reasoning includes both an analysis of the strict delimitation of his and Dwan's subject positions up to this point and an attempt to override this intersubjective delimitation by garnering more information about Dwan's individual motives.

Laak: Will you show me both [cards] if I fold? I know I get to see one if I fold, but will you show me both?

Dwan: Alright.

Laak: See, he knows that that's the question that people ask, and then if they say "alright," that means he *has* the quads or full house, because he would never say "alright," because he knows that I know that that's a sign of weakness, but it's not.

Joe Hashem: Try and follow the conversation now, mate.

Laak: Well, if he was a fish, I might call, but he's an übergenius, and he knows to reverse it. But maybe he reverses it twice, and it's back to—I'm supposed to call.²⁸

Hashem: You lost the audience at hello.

Laak: Ninety-four, you're betting so small. So, if I'm going to win this one in six times, I have to call? How can I win? You know that you're getting called.

The manner of Laak's reflection will be familiar to most poker players, and unusual only in the degree to which he expresses it aloud, presumably both to clarify his own thought process and in the (faint) hope of soliciting an informative reaction, or "tell," from Dwan. In game-theoretical terms, Laak's calculation is a relatively simple one: the "pot odds" dictate that, in order to win the \$62,800 at stake by the river, Laak would have to call Dwan's final bet of \$9,400, which represents a mere 15 percent of the total pot. If Dwan is likely to be bluffing at least 15 percent of the time, which is not altogether implausible, then calling in this situation becomes a potential winning play in the long-term and therefore an optimal strategy. Laak articulates this principle directly—"if I'm going to win this one in six times, I have to call."²⁹ Moreover, because Dwan is a player known to bluff frequently, the odds appear even more favorable, making Laak's call seem all but obligatory. Indeed, any player who consistently fails to call in such clear-cut scenarios—in other words, any player who regularly folds, given such favorable pot odds—renders his or her long-term play "exploitable," which is to say, opponents will quickly learn they can profitably bluff that player more than 15 percent of the time in similar situations.

Nonetheless, although Laak's calculation of the pot odds makes his call of Dwan's small river bet seem optimal, the very obviousness of the situation works against that same deduction. In essence, Laak realizes that Dwan is exactly as capable as he of making the same calculation, and then, as the commentator observes, "betting a small amount of money" to make Laak's call seem inevitable—as Laak straightforwardly asserts: "He knows that I know." Thus, the especially clear-cut pot odds not only fail to help Laak decide to call, but appear to make it even more likely that Laak will lose the hand, since Dwan, having calculated in the same way as Laak, cannot fail to have anticipated that Laak "must" call any sufficiently small bet that Dwan ventures to make. "How can I win?" Laak asks himself; "You know that you're getting called." The predicament confronting Laak, phrased in a paradoxical form that reflects the ambivalence of his back-and-forth, is that, given Dwan's equivalent understanding of Laak's situation, the likelihood of Dwan's bluff increases precisely in proportion to the degree that his bluff appears unlikely.

In structural terms, Laak has discovered himself to be *the same subject* as Dwan, despite all effort and time taken to distinguish his individual position and decision. Both he and Dwan are A, and neither can serve adequately as a mere "reflector" of the other's position; nor is there some third agent present whose further reading of the intersubjective reflection may be added into A's own deliberation. In Hegel's terms, the very simplicity of the dialectic has brought it to a standstill, with no further "experience" of its interrelationship conceivable.³⁰ In psychoanalytic terms, Laak's resignation to his frustrating subjective situation mimics the "compromise structure" of the symptom, in which the inexorable compulsion of the unconscious trumps any rational understanding that one is acting against one's own conscious intention or self-interest.³¹ Finally, in political terms—apropos because ultimately the contest into which Laak and Dwan have entered is for the power to determine a material gain or loss—any individualized position from which Laak might contemplate an advantageous play against Dwan is precluded by the real subjective conditions furnished by the structure of the game itself, and by the two players' fully equivalent understandings of the situation in which they discover themselves.

In light of this restricted economy, Laak's extended perseveration ex-

hibits what Lacan, in the “Mirror Stage” essay, calls “the inertia characteristic of the *I* formations,” a persistent defensive stance through which the “apparatus” of the *I* continually “misrecogniz[es]” the reality of its discordance with the social conditions out of which it arises.³² Essentially, the *I* is the mere “illusion of autonomy,” uneasily fashioned in opposition to what Lacan calls “the subject’s capture [*captation*] by [his] situation.”³³ Laak’s individual volition thus remains irreconcilable with his subjective “capture” by the all-too-clear dilemma of his decision. He discovers, in a nutshell, that he has no viable *I*, even though everything about his situation other than the “captative” conditions of the game—indeed, everything about *himself in general* as a functioning adult human—suggests he ought to have one. No wonder Lacan implies that we should treat such a “capture” as a type of “madness.”³⁴

Given the too-strictly mirrored reciprocity between himself and Dwan, is it then possible for Laak to summon an “illusion of autonomy” sufficient to decide to fold based on something other than either strict intersubjective conditions or (what amount to the same thing, in this case) simple game-theoretical calculations?³⁵ For instance, could Laak fold based on a precipitous “courage,” in Badiou’s term, regardless of pot odds and probabilities, in a nonlogical assertion of anticipated certainty?³⁶ It seems not. We can affirm this based not only on a structural analysis of the hand itself, but on Laak’s own reliably proficient resignation to his compulsion to call. Laak is too fully subjected to the game—its subjugating conditions are too persuasively *clear* to him—for any plausible individuality to gain a grip. We may further observe the generic nature of the player’s subjectivity by noting that, in the same way that Laak fails to individuate himself, Dwan, too, is fully determined. Indeed, the complete transparency of Dwan’s subjective stance is the essence of Laak’s own “capture.” Hence when Laak, still vainly seeking information, asks Dwan a series of direct questions, Dwan gives entirely forthright answers that quite obviously can have no impact on the situation that has evolved.

Laak: What do I do? What do you want me to do, Durrrr?³⁷

Esfandiar: [laughs] Is it binding?

Dwan: I can’t answer that question.

Laak: Show me one. Show me one card. Be sick, show me one card. I'll show you both right now if you show me one card. I'm never raising you, so I can show both.

Dwan: They both make you do the right decision.

Laak: [shows his hole cards] Is that any good?

Dwan: Isn't his hand dead once he shows it?

Laak: It's definitely not dead. Not here in sick land. So now he's saying, isn't it dead, so you really want me to call, because now you know I can't win.

[laughter]

Dwan: I really did think it was dead. But I want you to call, obviously. I mean I need to have you beat, right?

Dwan's responses—indeed, his answers to every question Laak poses to him—are not in the least deceptive. Indeed, throughout the entire hand, Dwan's speech encourages Laak, as Dwan himself says, to “do the right decision.” Immediately following this last exchange, Laak even alludes to the possibility of Dwan's bluff—“You could be doing all that with air”—and Dwan replies, uttering a truth that the very conditions of the game render a lie, “How could I have air? It's so hard.”

The structure of the conversation is close to a well-known “tendentious” Yiddish joke cited by Freud. A traveler meets his friend in a railway carriage and asks him where he is going. The friend answers that he is going to Cracow and receives this rebuke from the first traveler: “When you say you're going to Cracow, you want me to believe that you're going to Lemberg. But I know you're going to Cracow. So why are you lying?”³⁸ As Freud points out, the joke exploits an essential aspect of rhetoric that we understand yet regularly suppress: the fact that only the mutual cathexis (or transference) of a real intersubjective relationship can secure a “genuine truth,” never the mere exchange of information. In real conversation, a fact stated “without bothering about how our listener will understand what we have said”—I am going to Cracow—is merely “Jesuitical” and fails to convey to the listener “a true likeness of our own knowledge.”³⁹ Because of the subjects they *already* are, nothing the friends can say to each other will be “true”—there is no “individ-

ual” answer to the question “where are you going?,” but only a predetermined understanding, within the terms of the intersubjective game being played, that all answers will (in truth) be lies. In Laak’s situation, too, so long as the game continues to suspend the final, baldly empirical determination of relative intersubjective values—in brief, who wins the pot—no “representation” of a subjective position (holding a full house, going to Cracow) is deducible logically, as it were by a rational individual playing the game, but rather only *inducible* empirically, as it were by a game *piece* being played, which has available to it only the finite number of moves granted by its current structural role. That is why the announcer, Gabe Kaplan, eventually remarks that “Dwan told the truth at every point in that hand.” Dwan told a Jesuitical “truth” that, in the context of poker, is as perfectly effective a form of lying as it is in Yiddish jokes.

Can Laak act at all? That is to say, can he act according to what he knows with almost full certainty to be true, namely, that he is losing the hand? In short, can he *fold*, which is the only act that would individuate him from the conditions by which the game subjugates him, and an act that would permit him, like Lacan’s prisoner, to free himself by way of a dialectical coup: “I” see fully how I have been (generically) subjected, therefore “I” am (individually) freed to act upon an understanding of my homogeneity with the other(s) and distinguish my response from its structural conditioning.

No. Unlike Lacan’s prisoner, and more like the traveler to Cracow, it does not matter how long Laak continues to persevere, nor how long Dwan continues to tell him “truths” about the cards. The conditions of the game are already fixed by the time of Dwan’s river bet and will not evolve or devolve further. In this game, the discovery that we are both A provides me no additional means to push past my hesitation and act on the basis of an anticipated certainty, nor is my counterpart B in any revealing haste that might contribute to my advantage. In the end, it does not matter what Dwan says, or if he says anything at all—his subjectivity in the game bespeaks him as fully as Laak is bespoken by his structural compulsion to make the call. Neither “truth” nor any further exercise of logical ratiocination will change the outcome. In Hegel’s terms, there is no further “experience” of the intersubjective scenario to be gained; in

psychoanalytic terms, there is no fantasy of selfhood sufficiently persuasive to construct a different “compromise structure.”

The Political Subject

When I began, I proposed to consider poker as an allegory of the political subject, and perhaps the implications of such a figuration will now be clearer. Lacan’s example suggests that if I can interpret my and the other subjects’ essential identities—the fact that all three of us are A, as well as B and C—I will acquire a basis for gaining a real (political) stake, my potential freedom, provided that both I and the others can act in a timely fashion. In the poker hand, no such basis is forthcoming. Neither haste nor leisure, nor the large quantity of my own money put at risk, will alter the conditions the game furnishes. Thus, we have two very different allegorical set pieces illustrating the subject’s involvement in politics, and two very different conclusions as to possible outcomes, depending on whether or not a dialectical mastery can be acquired over and above the powerful (political or economic) structures that “capture” the subject.

Toward the end of his early book *Theory of the Subject*, Alain Badiou takes up Lacan’s prisoner game as an explicit illustration of political activism. Badiou starts by considering the precise value of the other’s hesitation. The reader will recall that A, upon completing his initial two-step deduction, is in a position to conclude with certainty that he is white and head toward the exit—but only provided that the other two prisoners, in their respective positions of B and C, do not also start to move (because of course they, too, are A). The necessary next step, whereby Lacan introduces the value of time in the logical process, would be for each A to further deduce—now based on the mutual hesitations of all three prisoners, which is to say, on the observation that each of them must perceive the same subjective condition (whiteness) in the others—the *general* whiteness of all three prisoners and therefore the generic basis for individual action on the part of each.

However, as Badiou points out, this second-order deduction presupposes what it was supposed to conclude, namely, that “whiteness” exhausts the parameters of the equivalence of subjectivities. In order to interpret the other’s hesitation as a significant indicator of *my* whiteness,

I must first presume that the sole reason for the other's nonmovement, at least up to the point that A himself decides to move, is the other's observation of two white disks, and not, for example, his relative slowness or inability to work through the logical puzzle at hand. Politically speaking, Lacan's allegory thus presupposes the strict binarism of subjectivity (white or black), excluding some real conditions of possible subjects (say, the aptitude to reason logically), despite Lacan's ambition to incorporate the "reality" of empirical effects into logic. In a nutshell, A must take for granted that B and C both think at exactly the same speed as he, if A is then willing to assign a specific value to any movement they subsequently make or do not make.

Therefore Badiou undertakes to ask a question that goes to the core of the temporality of A's deliberation, and which we can interpret as a fundamentally political question because it inquires as to the real subjective conditioning or subjugation of the other: What if B or C is stupid [*crétin*]?⁴⁰ What if the other's nonmovement is a consequence, not of ratiocinative skills similar to my own, but of mental incapacity?⁴¹ In reality (since actual political agents presumably do *not* all think at the same speed), I lack a firm basis to deduce simple "whiteness" as the natural consequence of the other's nonmovement or hesitation, and therefore I must ultimately act even more precipitously than Lacan suggests, "short-circuit[ing] the ambiguous message of the other's departure."⁴² It is this species of more impetuous decision that Badiou calls "courage," an accomplishment based not on my logical interpretation of the other—upon whose equivalent intelligence I can no longer depend—but on a "wager on the real" that I undertake despite the other's powers. Indeed, for Badiou, the only effective political action, given the essential ambiguity of the behavior of others, is to individually "expose myself to the real" without waiting to work through "the immobile temporality of the law" that governs intersubjective situations: "Victory belongs to the one who gains the upper hand by thinking on the go."⁴³ The conditions of real political action are thereby generalized: On the basis of courage, I act individually regardless of the other's potential stupidity, and therefore ultimately regardless of the equivalence or nonequivalence of our mutual subjectivities.

Can Laak do just this? For instance, can he summon the courage to

fold despite Dwan's actions or perhaps by surmising (improbably) that Dwan's actions might mean something different than what the game has made them seem? Everything about the hand, including Laak's own affect, which is reliably based on his lifelong experience as a competitor against players just like Dwan, suggests that he cannot.⁴⁴ The game provides no alternative to the subjective conditions leading up to Laak's call—no choice based on any real-time behavior of Dwan, who, after all, like Freud's traveler to Cracow, merely continues to convey the "true" parameters of his subjective state—nor any alternative based on the potential difference of Dwan's individual motives from those of Laak, since the sheer straightforwardness of the hand renders these differences null. In effect, Dwan *cannot be stupid*, a conclusion we draw as readily from our knowledge of Dwan himself as from Laak's resignation. The hand is too wholly circumscribed for courage to be anything but a mere error, perhaps even an unthinkable one.⁴⁵ Politically speaking, the scenario is too obvious, the setting of the game too fully delimited and known, for either Dwan or Laak to be stupid—or, indeed, for either of them to be any species of subject different from the other, for instance, a slower or speedier thinker or a better or worse liar.

Badiou presents a scenario in which the subject acts despite the law of intersubjective equivalence furnished by his subjection. It is, finally, the potential "difference of intellectual force" of subjects that opens the possibility of a courageous "wager on the real," an act characterized by an "excess over all calculation."⁴⁶ But note, even the mere possibility of such courage relies on the plausibility of an originary differentiation between subjects. The more that A, B, and C converge on one another—which is to say, the simpler and more transparent the conditions of subjection become, such that either stupidity or caprice in the face of these very conditions becomes ever more unlikely—the less feasible courage is. The poker hand gives an allegory of a political situation in which, arguably, many more subjects discover themselves than that of Badiou's courageous actor, a situation in which individual audacity and action are not merely fantasies but straight-up pipe dreams, just as it would be a pipe dream to expect a reliably truthful declaration from my friend, the traveler to Cracow, or a reliable (or dialectically unreliable) declaration from my opponent, Dwan, concerning the nature of his hand. We are in a



Fig. 6. Lock the doors.

more cynical realm than Badiou's, possibly the realm of Althusser's fully interpellated subject, for whom neither turning toward the hail of the policemen *nor declining to turn toward it* can constitute escape from subjugation by the state. Althusser's interpellated subject, hailed by the official, cannot "fold" any more than Laak. The conditions of interpellation are much too clear to permit courage in anything but a purely hypothetical guise, or as a mere mistake or anomaly that the very transparency of political subjugation renders virtually unthinkable.

And yet Laak continues to talk . . . and talk and talk, right up to the moment he calls Dwan's bet: "Worst call of my life. Wow, this is bad. I'm just paying him off." Presumably no person is content to be a mere subject, to be merely subjugated. Each of us is an individual; each *ought* to be able to distinguish his or her actions from those of a mere game piece, to make decisions based on logic, on empirical information, even on courage. And so Laak's frustration concludes with a sophisticated self-deprecating joke that dialectically compensates for his imprisonment by

the subjective conditions of the poker game, ironically foregrounding the possibility of his being a “fish” or a “payoff wizard” whom other players might exploit. Referencing the sham set for television that contains the all-too-real game he has been playing, Laak states, to the other players’ amusement, “Every one of you guys is thinking, lock the doors. But I’m letting you know, these are fake doors, and I can leave any time I want!” The doors are fake, yes, but perhaps not the locks.

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NOTES

1. John McDonald, “A Theory of Strategy,” in *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (sixtieth-anniversary ed.), eds. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 699. For the canonical discussion of poker in game theory, see von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 186–219.

2. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 181; see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–119.

3. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Albert Toscano (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 101.

4. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus, 1988), 75; Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 30; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 53; Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 173.

5. Lacan’s essay has only recently become easy to locate. It first appeared in the small journal *Les Cahiers d’Art* and was collected in the 1966 *Éditions du Seuil* version of Lacan’s *Écrits*, but not in the more widely available two-volume, mass-market *Seuil* edition of the early 1970s. An English translation was first published in 1988 in the *Newsletter of the Freudian Field*, and then appeared in the English version of *Écrits*

only with Bruce Fink's "First Complete Edition" in 2006. See Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006).

6. Lacan, "Logical Time," 161.

7. Lacan, "Logical Time," 163. A closely related interchangeability of algebraic subject positions is worked through in Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" (in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink [New York: Norton, 2006]). Shoshona Felman's analysis of the Poe seminar elaborates most clearly the interrelationships of subjects identified (not by coincidence) as A, B, and C. See Felman, "On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalysis," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 144–150.

8. See Lacan, "Logical Time," 162–165. For a good brief gloss of "the perfect solution," see Bruce Fink, "Logical Time and the Precipitation of Subjectivity," in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 358–359.

9. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 113.

10. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 113.

11. Lacan, "Logical Time," 165, 174.

12. See especially Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 248–258; Fink, "Logical Time"; Derek Hook, "Toward a Lacanian Group Psychology: The Prisoner's Dilemma and the Trans-Subjective," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no. 2 (2012): 115–132; Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 23–35; Sara McNamara, "The Retroactive Temporality of Subjectivity" (PhD diss, Stony Brook University, 2011; UMI/ProQuest 3481188), 72–84; Alexander Williams, "Doing Time: A Sideways Glance at the Pauses and Hesitations in Jacques Lacan's Essay on Logical Time," *Kaleidoscope* 5, no. 2 (2013): 180–201.

13. Lacan, "Logical Time," 168.

14. Lacan, "Logical Time," 169, 170.

15. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 251. Note also: "The subjective, in the differential of forces, always pre-exists itself. That subject who I come to be in certainty is something I could only anticipate, based on its supposedly being already there, through the evaluation of the other" (256).

16. Lacan, "Logical Time," 170.

17. Lacan, "Logical Time," 169.

18. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 258.

19. For the original television episode, see *High Stakes Poker*, season 5, ep. 10 (aired May 24, 2009, on GSN). The hand is excerpted and available from several online

sources; see “High Stakes Poker—Phil Laak vs. Tom Dwan,” <https://www.pokertube.com/video/high-stakes-poker—phil-laak-vs-tom-dwan>; “Laak vs. Durrr,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7M2__J4c1s.

20. The conventional ranking of five-card poker hands from highest to lowest is as follows: straight flush (all cards in sequence and the same suit), four of a kind (or “quads”), full house (three of a kind plus a pair), flush (all the same suit), straight (all in sequence), three of a kind (“trips” or a “set”), two pair, and one pair. In instances where both players hold the same hand, or have no “made” hand containing at least one pair, the highest cards, or “kickers,” win; for instance, a straight to the nine beats a straight to the eight, a pair of jacks with an ace kicker beats a pair of jacks with a king kicker, and a ten-high (with no pair) beats a nine-high. Where there is a tie at “showdown” (for example, two players hold the same pair and kickers, or the best possible hand is on the board), the pot is split between the remaining players in the hand.

21. The one exception to this minimum bet size occurs when a player’s remaining stack totals less than the big blind, in which case any bet he or she makes will be “all in.”

22. Given the three sixes already on the board, if either of Dwan’s hole cards makes a pair, he will have one of these winning hands.

23. As Dwan can easily see, by the river, the only winning hole cards Laak could have are a pair of nines or a pair of sixes. From Dwan’s perspective, based on both the mathematical odds and the betting that has transpired so far—in particular, Laak’s checks on the turn and river—Laak is extremely unlikely to be holding either of those pairs.

24. An “overpair” is a pair in the player’s hole higher than any card currently on the board.

25. To “limp” into a hand is to call preflop rather than raise, whether in order to see a flop cheaply or to disguise especially good hole cards.

26. Von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 189. Compare Dan Harrington’s adaptation of this game-theoretical principle into what he calls, with tongue slightly in cheek, “Harrington’s Law”: “The probability that your opponent is bluffing when he shoves a big bet in the pot is always *at least 10 percent*” (Harrington and Bill Robertie, *Harrington on Hold’em: Expert Strategy for No-Limit Tournaments*, vol. 1 [Las Vegas: Two Plus Two Publishing, 2007], 132; authors’ emphasis). Note that my concern is not to judge the quality of Laak’s play or the wisdom of his call, which one can find debated, if one is interested, in the comments sections of the online videos of this hand.

27. See David Sklansky, *The Theory of Poker*, 4th ed. (Las Vegas: Two Plus Two Publishing, 1999), 17ff; in general, also see Sklansky and Ed Miller, *No Limit Hold’em: Theory and Practice* (Las Vegas: Two Plus Two Publishing, 2006).

28. "Fish" is poker slang for a poor or inexperienced player.
29. Laak underestimates the pot odds at "one in six times," probably based on his quick rounding of the numbers (a call of about \$10,000 to win a pot of about \$60,000). The actual pot odds, at 15 percent (\$9,400 to win \$62,800), are closer to one in seven, which actually makes a call even more suitable.
30. See note 45.
31. Freud first refers to symptoms as a "compromise structure" in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess on June 4, 1896; see Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psycho-analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess: Drafts and Notes: 1887–1902*, eds. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris, trans. Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1954), 166.
32. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 80.
33. Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 80.
34. Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 80.
35. Poker players sometimes make decisions partly based on a "live read," an interpretation or exploitation of the opponent's "tell" that may indicate a nonoptimal but nonetheless correct decision. Of course, the more Laak is aware of Dwan's potential tells, some of which he explicitly considers—and, just as important, the more Dwan himself is aware of them—the less they distinguish any idiosyncratic or "individual" divergence from optimal play, and therefore the less potential opportunity they provide for Laak to diverge from strict theory.
36. Poker players sometimes refer to such a deliberately nonoptimal or "exploitative" play as a "hero fold" or "hero call."
37. "Durrrr" is Dwan's well-known online poker screen name.
38. Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (New York: Penguin, 2002), 110.
39. Freud, *Joke and Its Relation*, 110.
40. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 254; in general, see 254–258. For a useful discussion of Badiou's reading, see Ed Pluth and Dominiek Hoens, "What If the Other Is Stupid? Badiou and Lacan on 'Logical Time,'" in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (New York: Continuum, 2004).
41. Of course, it is also possible to conjecture that A is stupid, or at least stupider than B or C.
42. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 257.
43. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 258.
44. About a year later, on a different television show, *Poker After Dark*, Laak and Dwan play a hand in which Dwan makes a similarly confounding bet, this time as a bluff. On the river, Dwan vastly over-bets the pot, knowing that Laak is ahead but

creating a scenario in which Laak is obliged to fold despite his near certainty he is winning. In essence, although the action is reversed (Dwan bluffs rather than value-bets), the psychological structure of the play is similar. The hand is usefully analyzed by Grant Denison and Jonathan Levy in their video series, “The Breakdown.” Levy remarks: “There’s nothing Tom Dwan can have that makes any sense. What he does know and what does make sense is that Phil Laak is almost always going to find a fold, and that’s what makes sense, and that’s good enough.” See “The Breakdown: Tom Dwan Drives Phil Laak Crazy,” *The Poker Guys*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5dHU8mNk24>; *Poker After Dark*, season 6, ep. 47 (aired June 18, 2010 on NBC).

45. When I originally presented a portion of this work at a conference, one audience member asked why Laak, given that he desires to escape the game-theoretical parameters compelling his call, cannot do something even more blatantly nonoptimal than folding, for instance, raising or moving all in. I presume that any relatively experienced poker player will see why Laak should probably never raise in this spot. But, in fact, Laak does consider the possibility of a raise himself during the course of his deliberation, dismissing it virtually in the same breath.

46. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 258.