Conclusion: Philosophical Psychoanalysis?

To conclude, I’d like to provide some thoughts on the meta-theoretical status of my argument. What, finally, is the ‘Real’, both in terms of its position within Lacan’s wider metapsychology and his theory of the subject, and how might it dramatize wider questions around the relationship between philosophy and psychoanalysis? Whilst only implicit, these questions are nonetheless hinted at in the last chapter, where my attempt to reconstruct Lacan’s theory of the body in and around the concept of the Real begs the wider question of the status of the theory that results. Is what results a theory of the body, of materiality, of the material signifier and of the subject strictly proper to psychoanalysis? And if so, how does my philosophical methodology – reconstructive, synthetic – gain an epistemological hold on what is, after all, a problem of clinical import?

As I signalled in the Introduction, and as will have become clear through the entirety of this book, Lacan hesitates to give succinct, stable definitions of his concepts; and this is perhaps true most of all of the Real. As he writes definitively in Seminar 1, and as I quoted him in the Introduction, ‘it is not for nothing that the real is always in the background, and that I never refer to it directly in our commentaries here. It is, quite precisely, and quite properly speaking, excluded’.¹ That this declaration should come in Seminar 1 is apt, setting up as it does both the centrality and elusiveness of the concept that will form the horizon for all that comes after.² The exclusion that Lacan writes of here functions on many levels. We can say that, at the level of the subject, the Real is excluded as a constitutive threat, manifest in primary narcissism as the ambiguity of the image of the Other and in the Symbolic as objet petit a, the Real element that links up with the signifier-in-isolation. At the meta-theoretical level, which is to say at the level of the overall
conceptual structure of Lacan’s work, the Real is excluded, often left only implicitly defined, but here again the exclusion is constitutive: as I’ve argued throughout, the Real nonetheless functions as the abiding concern of psychoanalytic theory and practice. How does this constitutive elusiveness function?

As I have shown in Chapter 1, the antagonism installed at the heart of subjectivity through the process of primary narcissism is both partially relieved and perpetuated by the intervention of the Symbolic order. In so far, that is, as the antagonism proper to identification compels the nascent subject to accede to the Symbolic, it is constitutive, bringing about the production of ‘full’ subjecthood, at least for those subjects not prey to psychosis. And, as I have shown in Chapter 3, psychosis itself helps to reveal the more general condition of the Symbolic for the life of the subject, highlighting as it does the effectivity of the signifier-in-isolation. Antagonism persists through that element of the Symbolic that provided its ground in the process of identification, namely the signifier-in-isolation, and Lacan’s later writing will develop the object proper to the Real, objet petit a, precisely out of this movement between the Imaginary and Symbolic. Thus, the Real operates here, in its very ‘exclusion’, through a function of simultaneous constitution and threatened dissipation, or through a double logic of formation and deformation: at the level of the Imaginary, the Real, as the antagonism at the heart of primary narcissism, both contributes to the constitution of the subject and installs trauma at its centre, while at the level of the Symbolic, the object of desire compels the desire that motivates the subject while nonetheless proving opaque, unmasterable, a potential threat, provoking the various questions that, for Lacan, are constitutive of neurosis.3

From Chapter 2 onwards I have shown this logic working in a variety of different areas of psychoanalytic concern. Fundamental to all of those phenomena is the theory of language that I have argued is central to any understanding of the Real. Through my typology of the signifier-in-isolation and the signifier-in-relation, I have shown how, for Lacan, the logic of simultaneous formation and deformation described above is redoubled at the level of the signifier: the signifier, in its two aspects, acts as both the necessary ground for the production of meaning and the element that, in its material isolation, acts as a potential barrier to that meaning. Here again, the double logic proper to the Real, that of constitutive and threatened dissipation, of formation and deformation, is affirmed. Through this account of the materiality of signification, further, I have shown how Lacan develops a novel, if allusive, theory