

The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience

Calum Neill

The *mirror stage* is a conceptual framework elaborated by Jacques Lacan in his seminal essay *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique*. This essay, as it appears in *Écrits* is a significantly revised version of a paper Lacan presented at the 14th International Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad in August 1936. The later and better known 'version' of the essay was itself originally presented at 16th International Psychoanalytic Congress in Zurich in July 1949 and subsequently published in *Revue française de psychanalyse* later that year. It is worth noting the unusual time lapse between the first and ultimate version of the essay. At a mere eight pages, the essay appears to have been a work in progress for over thirteen years. This should alert us to the centrality of the work and the ideas contained within it to Lacan's project. While Lacan had been building an impressive reputation before the final version of the essay appeared, we might understand it as the publication which announced his arrival as a major figure on the world stage.

The *mirror stage* does not, then, of course, erupt suddenly from nowhere. Many of the ideas presented here are adumbrated in some fashion in earlier works. As early as his doctoral thesis (1932), Lacan is considering the complex of identification in terms of the misfit of mirrored reflection, describing his subject, Aimee, in terms which clearly pre-echo the ideas of 'The Mirror Stage', noting, for example, that she relates to her contemporaries simultaneously as ideals and as objects of aggressivity (Lacan, 1932: 225). A short while later, in his early essay 'Beyond the Reality Principle' (1936) he discusses at some length the centrality of the image and of identification in the psychical and social life of humanity in ways which explicitly prefigure 'The Mirror Stage'. More explicitly still, his 1938 text 'Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual' contains a section titled 'The Mirror Stages' which it has been suggested covers similar ground to the lost 1936 presentation.

It is also important to note that even after the publication of the essay in 1949, Lacan continued to refer to and refine the core ideas presented therein. Thus the term *the mirror stage* has come to commonly refer to both the essay itself and the central concept expounded within it and subsequently developed in Lacan's seminars. This central concept

itself is inspired in part by the work of the French psychologist Henri Wallon. Wallon (1931) observed, through a procedure he termed 'the mirror test', that both human and chimpanzee infants were capable of recognising themselves in a mirror at around six months. What Wallon found significant here is that while the chimpanzee would quickly lose interest, the human infant becomes fascinated and will spend some time entranced by the phenomenon of the mirror image, exploring the apparent connections between their body and the reflected image. For Wallon, what is significant here is that the child has succeeded in distinguishing what we might call two levels of the visual. The child can see (parts of) itself in the flesh and it can see (parts of) itself reflected in the mirror. That the child seems to distinguished these two sights can be understood to point towards some transition from an imagistic (or imaginary) grasp of the world to a representative (or symbolic) one. The argument Lacan develops out of Wallon's point here is that the encounter with the mirror is pivotal in the emergence of the child's identity. We come, to put it simply, to identify ourselves on the basis of an external, reflected image.

A number of commentators have taken issue with Lacan's arguments here, arguing that the phenomenon on which he bases them is unscientific or untestable and, seemingly more cuttingly, that Lacan's own appeals to science and psychology in the essay are misleadingly selective at best. Perhaps the best known such critique comes from Michael Billig (2006) who argues that Lacan effectively misuses psychology in his paper. Without dismissing the fascinating insights of Billig's work, we need to pause here and consider what the use value of psychology might have been for Lacan. To claim that someone has misused psychology is to suppose that there is a proper use to which psychology might be put and, then, an improper one. Lacan clearly does misuse psychology insofar as his citations are often vague and imprecise. Insofar as we understand Lacan to be building a theory of child development and insofar as we would understand Wallon, Köhler and Baldwin to be adequate foundations for such a project, we might understand Billig's critique to hit home. These suppositions are, however, rather wide of the mark and, arguably, miss the many points of Lacan's essay. Part of the problem here is a tendency to reduce Lacan's argument to two points and, moreover, to posit the second point as reliant on the first.

These two points are that children in a certain point in their development will forge the beginnings of an identity when they recognize a reflected image as themselves and,

subsequent to this, they will, as they mature and become adults, continue to forge identities in similar ways. What this simplistic reduction misses is the connection or relation between the two modes of the mirror stage. Why, we might ask, if the child establishes its identity in the first moment, would the second moment be necessary at all? The important point here is that the process of identification evoked in each dimension here is necessarily a failure. Moreover, it is not simply that the continuing, lifelong mirror staging is a consequence of an initial failure. Rather we should read the failing dimension of what appears to be a second stage as already entailed within what only appears to be a first stage.

The logic here is apparently not only complex but it is one which is radically incommensurate with the conventions within which critics such as Billig would like to remain. To appreciate what Lacan is doing in the essay, it is necessary to look at it much more closely and less selectively.

More coherent and insightful accounts of 'The Mirror Stage' do, of course, exist. Amongst the best and worth mentioning here is Dany Nobus's 'Life and Death in the Glass: a New Look at the Mirror Stage' (Nobus, 1998) and, in terms of providing a very useful contextualization, Elisabeth Roudinesco's contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, 'The Mirror Stage: An Obliterated Archive' (Roudinesco, 2003). 'The Mirror Stage' is also widely referenced and commented upon in a myriad of books and articles and is undoubtedly the most read, best known and most influential of Lacan's works. This is in part due to its appearance in many anthologies, particularly from within literary and film studies. Through this dissemination, the idea of the mirror stage has become fairly commonplace in an impressive range of disciplines, from the aforementioned literary and film studies and psychology and more widely among the social sciences and cultural studies. In becoming rather widely known, the concept of the mirror stage can be understood to have become somewhat fixed and conveniently oversimplified. The dominance of a particular, if not terribly precise, understanding of what the mirror stage is and means can then be understood to already infect the understanding of anyone who reads the essay itself. That is to say, when you come to read the essay you are likely to already be reading it through a number of received interpretations and this, encouraged by the characteristic density of Lacan's writing, can lead to expedient glossing of the text.

In addition, as already noted, the concept of the mirror stage is not restricted to this one piece from Lacan's writings. He had already written on the concept before 1949 and he continued to refer to and develop the concept for decades to come. Here, however, the attempt has been made to focus on 'The Mirror Stage' as a piece of writing, rather than to assume to extract from this and other pieces of writing a developing concept. Only after we have read the initial essay carefully might we be in a position to consider the *mirror stage* as a concept.

The Text

1. Lacan opens his essay (75) with a little contextualisation and a reference to the earlier version, remarking not only on the time which has lapsed between his 1936 presentation and his 1949 presentation, but also on the significance his conception of the *mirror stage* has taken on for what he refers to as 'the French group'; i.e. his own circle. He then clearly states his core motivation for revisiting the concept of the *mirror stage* and, consequently, the core concern of the current essay. He is concerned with the formation of what he terms 'the I' and he is concerned with this specifically as it is experienced within a psychoanalytic context. We can already glean from the expanded title of the essay (the 1936 version was simply called *La stade du miroir*, 'The Mirror Stage') the 'I' to which he is referring is a function, not an essence or an entity as such. The reference to 'the experience psychoanalytic provides' suggests that the focus of the piece is to be clinical. As we read on it will become evident that this is not exactly the case. This underscores a crucial dimension to reading Lacan both in this paper and throughout the *Écrits* and the seminars. Lacan is a psychoanalyst and is concerned with teaching psychoanalysts and thus with the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. He is also always drawing on a wider body of cultural and philosophical texts and thus engaging in a dialogue which necessarily exceeds the bounds of the clinic. Thus, when Lacan says that he is concerned with the formation of the I as we experience it in psychoanalysis, he is, of course, referring to the understanding of the 'I' as evident in clinical practice but he is also suggesting that this conception of the formation of the 'I' is something we need to take outside the clinic.

This point is made in the final and forceful sentence of the first paragraph where Lacan declares that the experience of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, and subsequently his theory, is

such that it positions us in opposition to any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*. This claim performs a number of functions. Firstly, it draws our attention to Descartes and thus situates the theme or focus of Lacan's intervention. It tells us that what we are about to read is concerned with fundamental questions of subjectivity and self-knowledge and locates such questions in a modern, i.e. post-enlightenment, context. Secondly, it situates Lacan and this essay in relation to the then current intellectual climate of Paris.

In 1946 Jean Paul Sartre had published his famous tract *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*. Here Sartre argues that 'the subjectivity which we thus postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism, for as we have demonstrated, it is not only one's own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too' (1946). Sartre's argument, while constituting a radical departure from Descartes' solitary individualism and drawing on a certain Hegelianism, does not, to Lacan's mind, go far enough. Sartre's problem with Descartes is that his philosophy shuts us off from others. He wants to maintain a solidarity, a social dimension at the core of subjectivity. Lacan's issue with this is that it does not go far enough, that it still accepts the basic self-identity of Cartesianism. Sartre famously declares in his essay that 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre: 22). For Lacan, there is no essence.

The thing to keep in mind, however, is that Lacan is not simply rejecting Cartesianism. Lacan returns to Descartes again and again (see opening chapter of Neill, 2011). We should read this claim then with an emphasis on 'directly' (75). Lacan is fascinated by Descartes' basic operation but argues that he gets it wrong. Lacan refashions the *cogito* as 'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not' (Lacan, 1977: 166). This is a complex manoeuvre. Thinking occurs in language but language can never capture it all. I therefore think in a realm which is other to me, while at the same time I am not a possibility outwith this realm. I exist in a constant tension between being and meaning. On the simplest level, Descartes, according to Lacan, only establishes the ego. The mistake is to assume that the ego is all. This also, then, extends Lacan's criticism to ego psychology and what we would now refer to as mainstream psychology.

So, in a short opening paragraph, Lacan announces his targets. He refuses the conventions of Cartesian subjectivity, the supposed subject of modernity and, with it, modern science. But

more than this, he refuses the apparently radical and certainly chic existentialism of the Left Bank. For Lacan it is not that radical at all. His project, over the next few pages (and, to be fair, over the next few decades) will be to explore and reconfigure how we think about ourselves and how we think an idea of ourselves into existence. He is not concerned to find a pre-existent self but rather he is concerned with exploring the contradictions and ramifications of our conception of ourselves.

2. Lacan links the concept of the mirror stage, at least in its earlier formation, to an observation from Wolfgang Köhler's work with chimpanzees (1925). Köhler is understood to have demonstrated that at a point in infancy when a child seems less developed than a chimpanzee a striking anomaly is evident. Despite the chimpanzee's superiority in terms of its instrumental intelligence, the human infant appears more developed in one significant way; it is able to recognise itself in a mirror. Not only does the human infant recognise itself but it marks such recognition with what we might term a *eureka!* moment. This moment can be understood as the beginning of the child's ability to situate itself in the context of the world.

This is an extremely complex operation. Even in adulthood, we simultaneously perceive the world and experience ourselves. To achieve this recognition we need to perform the complex and imaginative operation of synthesising these two experiences. That is to say, we have to imagine ourselves in the world.

Lacan refers to this process as situational apperception, a term he credits to Köhler. In the context of Gestalt Psychology, the term situational apperception might simply be understood as something like contextual apprehension; that is, the ability to conceptually grasp oneself in space. Given the preceding paragraph's invocation of Descartes, however, we might also see the term apperception as resonating with a philosophical sense. The term apperception (*appercevoir*) is in fact introduced by Descartes in his *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649), although it is most often translated simply as perception, indicating, as Leibniz (1714/1992) has pointed out, that Descartes did not adequately distinguish the two. Leibniz argues that Descartes conflates (conscious) thought and perception and thus excludes the

possibility of a perception of which we are not conscious. Seeking to clarify, he distinguishes apperception as conscious from simple perception, which is continuous but not conscious. Kant (1781/2007) further utilizes the term apperception in the construction of his epistemological theory, distinguishing between transcendental and empirical apperception. The former refers to the necessity, in Kant's schema, of a unifying consciousness which would hold together all experience. The latter refers to one's awareness of oneself in the moment, the sense of self which would accompany any activity of thought. Clearly there is a spatial significance to the mode of apperception to which Lacan refers here and we might understand the qualifying 'situational' as intended precisely to refuse Kant's transcendental apperception. For Lacan, there is no unity of self in consciousness.

Curiously, while Köhler is brought in here in relation to the notion of situational apperception, the whole paragraph could be understood to orbit around this proper name. Köhler, as well as being one of the founders of Gestalt psychology (1929), worked for six years with primates in Tenerife, particularly investigating problem solving. In relation to problem solving in human subjects, Köhler observed that we often solve problems when we are not actively or consciously thinking about them. Probably the most famous example of this phenomenon is Archimedes' discovery of displacement when, following his wife's suggestion that he stop working and relax, he took a bath. His famous cry of 'eureka' is how Lacan's *Aha-Erlebnis* would be translated. Köhler was also a phenomenologist, indicating a theoretical link with Sartre. This knotty configuration of unobvious references renders the short paragraph incredibly dense, signalling a variety of meanings, associations and points of departure. This example, early in the essay, should alert us to the unusual use of references throughout. Proper names are cited where the referent is not at all clear. References are alluded to with no name flagged. What we need to perhaps ask in each of these many incidences is, what are the effects? What echoes are triggered? Rarely are we going to encounter anything as simple as a direct, conventional citation.

3. Returning to the chimpanzee (although Lacan now refers to it as a monkey), while it may recognise itself, or at least register its image, it will soon lose interest. The child, on the other hand, is captivated by the reflection of its movements and the apparent relationship

between these movements and the reflected movements and their reflected backdrop. The reflection of the backdrop, the environment in which and against which the child's reflected movements appear is important to keep in mind. The two worlds – the mirror world and reality – appear connected. Added to this, it is not going to only be the room, the furniture, toys etc. which are reflected in the mirror but, crucially, there will most likely be other people too.

4. Lacan suggests that it is commonly accepted that this mirror recognition will occur after six months of age. In articulating this claim to Baldwin, who does not appear to have made the claim himself, Lacan might be understood to be invoking earlier theorists of the social self such as James, Mead, Cooley as well as Baldwin himself who did advance the idea that one's sense of self develops through imitation or mirroring of the other. The social dimension is certainly what Lacan wishes to emphasise, pointing as he does to the fact that before the child has independent movement, before it can walk or even support itself, it will need to be held in front of the mirror. Whether the child is held by a parent or sibling or it is held up by a baby walker, it will require a support which is external to itself. This raises a number of important points. Firstly, it emphasises the intrigue the child displays. According to what appear to be Lacan's own observations, the child will lean into the mirror, hold its own gaze and, resisting the constraints of its support, will respond with 'a flutter of jubilant activity' (76). This in turn emphasises that, despite the mirror containing a reflection of the room, its contents and any other persons there, the focus of the child's attention is likely to be firmly on itself. We should not ignore, however, the social dimension implied here. While the child may be fixated on its own reflection, the experience is most commonly going to be one accompanied by another. Not only does this already mark one's initial recognition of one's self as already socially mediated but it also implies the disjuncture of the fact that there are, for example, suddenly two mothers to contend with.

5. The child's reaction points to a libidinal dimension of the mirror encounter. The child is not merely curious but is jubilant. An element of desire is evident here. Lacan also claims here that this scenario underpins his claim that all human knowledge is paranoiac. The experience of the child before the mirror points, he says, to 'an ontological structure of the

human world that accords with my reflections on paranoiac knowledge' (76). It is worth noting here that Lacan refers to the 'human world' (76) rather than simply the world. This emphasizes the mediated nature of what is at stake here. The world we encounter is not the world as is but the world as we encounter it, the world already constructed through the prism of human knowledge or, in Lacan's later terminology, the world structured through the symbolic. More than this, however, Lacan wants to emphasize that such knowledge is not somehow emotionally neutral but is always affected by a paranoiac tension. Lacan holds that paranoia is not something that develops or emerges gradually, but rather that it is precipitated by certain 'fertile moments' (Lacan, 1993: 17) which involve 'external relationships' (Ibid: 18). An element from outside is internalized on the basis of what it is thought to illuminate about the subject's being. This is the process Lacan terms *meconnaissance* and it is the same process we see in the mirror stage, thus suggesting that paranoia is structurally commonplace (see Vanheule, 2011: 16).

6. Lacan goes on to say that the mirror stage describes an identification, emphasising the process of identification rather than identity as a fixed state. This identification is the result of a transformation of the subject as it takes on an image. The sense of a transformation here should perhaps resonate with the idea of metamorphosis and, subsequently, with the tale of Narcissus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus is transformed, takes on a new form as the result of his encounter with a reflection. In psychoanalytic terms the product of identification would be termed an *imago*, a term which also denotes a developmental stage of maturity such as the butterfly in relation to the caterpillar. The term *imago* would also connote an idealised image as in *Imago Dei*, an image of God. Lacan appears to be drawing on these multiple sense to paint a picture here of a process of identification which marks the distinct movement to another phase or stage of experience through the internalisation of an idealised idea. The identification which takes place then, is not an identification with what is.

7. The mirror experience is the exemplary case of human self-experience. This underscores the point here that we are not only dealing with a developmental stage but with something which will repeat throughout our lives. It is easy to see with a baby that the image they begin to identify with is quite different from the bodily experience they live. Babies cannot

control their own bodies – just note the frequency with which a child will bop itself on the head with a toy, or reach out to grab one thing and collide with another. Babies are utterly dependent on their caregivers. The difference, then, between the image in the mirror and the uncontrolled lived experience is itself what gives rise to a jubilation as the infant assumes the image as itself. Lacan's use of the term 'assumption' here is significant. In assuming the reflected image, the child is taking it on, in the sense that one might assume a title, but the child is also mistaking the image as itself, in the common sense that one might make an assumption prior to the facts. Thirdly, we might hear here an echo of the Christian notion of assumption wherein a body is transposed from one realm to another. Typically, this would be from earth to heaven. Here it is from one side of the mirror divide to the other. Taking all three notions of assumption allows us to grasp the simultaneous emphases being placed here on the body, on transition, on language and on error. What is assumed is not only taken from, taken on and taken to mean, it is also mistaken as. One key point which arises out of this is that the mirror stage being presented here is not something which can be located exclusively in childhood. After this assumed initial event, after we exit the apparent animal existence of infancy and move more explicitly and fully into culture, social identity and language, we still continue to experience a mismatch between our idea of ourselves and our experience of ourselves. This idea we have of ourselves is what Lacan is referring to as the *I*.

8. Immediately, Lacan expands on this to clarify that the *I* as he is referring to it here would be equivalent to what in Lacanian terminology would usually be referred to as the Ideal-I. The ideal-I or ideal-ego refers to our idealised image of ourselves and is in part the basis of libidinal identifications with others. What is crucial here is the fact that the ideal-I, based on misrecognition, is fictional, not real. This is then to situate the whole of what Lacan refers to as the 'ego function', the internalisation of a quasi-coherent sense of self, as fictional and, given the astatic nature of the ego, as an unfolding fiction. This means there is always going to be a mismatch between the experience of subjectivity and the ego. They will never coincide. They remain asymptotical; coming close but without the possibility of ever actually coinciding.

9. This mismatch is seen clearly through the fact that what the child is identifying with is a mirror image. While in everyday usage we may take the mirror image of something to be a reasonably accurate representation of what it is, Lacan wants to draw our attention to the illusion in such a move. A mirror image is always, by definition, inverted. You move your right hand, the mirror image moves its left hand. Perhaps less obviously, it is also always partial, distorted and smaller. Moreover, in the current context, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is only a shape or form. The German term Lacan uses here, *Gestalt*, which literally means form, immediately also brings to mind the school of Gestalt Psychology, as previously flagged in the reference to Köhler. Gestalt theory, which is primarily concerned with perception, argues that what we first perceive is the whole form (*Gestalt*) and from this we discern parts, rather than perceiving parts and composing them into a greater whole. This is the point Lacan is making when he says that the form is 'more constitutive than constituted' (76). What is also crucial here, for Lacan's point, is that the form is merely that, a shape or an image. It has no interiority, no spirit or personality. We project onto or into this form our sense of self, much in the same way as we might project characteristics onto a statue or an automaton.

Having begun by warning us against proceeding directly from Descartes, Lacan appears here to be making a direct reference to the Meditations. In his second meditation, Descartes looks down into the street from his window at the people walking below. How, he asks, can he know that what he sees are really people like himself rather than automata beneath hats and coats. Descartes feels certain of himself but cannot be sure of the reality of others. Lacan is extending this very point to make the case that we cannot even be sure of ourselves. Just like Descartes' consideration of the automata, we start from an exterior image and imagine an interiority. It is not, however, simply the fact that there is a mismatch here, that the mirror image is not the same as the figure that stands before it. The mirror image appears to maintain a coherence and consistency which is absent from the child's bodily experience. In seeing before it an image of itself which is more capable than it experiences itself to be, the child encounters the future albeit in a fantasised form. This underscores a key force of the mirror stage; it is concerned with a futurity, an anticipation but an anticipation for a future self which will never arrive, which is always to come. Such an anticipation is then also a projection. Encountering the other that is the mirror image as a

more advanced manifestation, leads the subject to posit itself as inferior. This then situates the subject as permanently under the shadow of the fantasy but it also sets in motion a certain creative trajectory. The child is not adequate to the image before it, but neither is the image actually what the child mistakes it to be.

10. Lacan appeals to clinical experience to support the idea that the image of oneself is fundamental to experiencing the world. The image of ourselves pervades our psychic life, in dreams, in hallucinations. Body parts. Bodily failure. The otherness of the image we take to be ourselves. All of these appear to become fundamental to our experience of ourselves in the world. We relate to the world in terms of our image of ourselves despite the fact that this image is 'only' an image. In fact the very idea that something is *only* an image is itself delusional. Images have effects as the structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss had discussed at length through his concept of symbolic effectiveness (Levi-Strauss, 1958/1963: 167-205).

11. Lacan appeals to zoology to support the notion that the encounter with an image can have such profound effects. Some pigeons require the presence of another pigeon to mature sexually but this other pigeon can be a mirror image (Matthews, 1939). All it takes, then, is for the pigeon to encounter an image for a real biological effect to take place. Similarly locusts, according to Lacan, will change their social nature simply by exposure to the correct image. Lacan appears to want to argue here that homeomorphic identification, the identification with something of the same form, plays a fundamental role in both human and animal relations with the world.

12. Extending the significance of visual identification, Lacan raises the question of mimicry wherein an animal appears to engage in a form of identification with something which is other than itself by adopting its form. The mirror stage encounter might be understood to sit between these two, homeomorphic and heteromorphic identifications, insofar as it describes the encounter with something which on the one hand we take to be the same and on the other is not the same. Lacan is keen to stress here that this function cannot simply be reduced to a mode of adaptation.

In addition to the liminal location of mirror stage encounter between same and other, Lacan wants here to emphasise the fact that the encounter always takes place in a space. As indicated earlier, the focus of attention may appear to be on the image the child takes to be itself but we cannot ignore the context which accompanies this. It is not only the form with which one identifies which shapes our developing idea of self but also the environment in which we find ourselves. Ultimately, the two cannot be separated. Lacan refers here to the Roger Caillois's concept of *legendary psychasthenia*, the phenomenon whereby an animal, such as a praying mantis, blends with its surroundings (Caillois, 1948/2003). What is significant about *legendary psychasthenia* here is that it illustrates that the separation between an individual and its context, between *me* and the world in which I find myself, is not so absolute.

13. Echoing the point made earlier about the paranoid character of human knowledge, Lacan here argues that even prior to the socialising effects which would be understood to engender such a paranoid structure, human beings are going to be tipped in this direction due to their insufficiency. It is not simply that at the point of the mirror stage in infancy, when we are less than two years old, we are incapable of surviving or even moving about on our own. Lacan argues that we are always organically insufficient or inadequate and can never become anything other than organically insufficient. The human condition is not and cannot be a natural one. The very notion of nature is a construct posited from a position of knowledge which would, by definition, be beyond nature.

14. The mirror stage can thus be understood as a particular example of how the *imago* works to establish a relationship between an organism and its environment or, phrased more generally, between the inner world (*Innenwelt*) and the outer world (*Umwelt*). Key here is the fact that what is established is a relationship, not a correspondence. Neither can be reduced to the other, nor is there a direct mapping of one to the other. What connects what we would think of as inside and outside is forged.

15. However, we need to keep in mind that the experience of human beings is different from other organisms due to the fact that we are born too early. Where other animals can function reasonably independently from a very early age, human beings are not born ready to survive. A foal, to use a most obvious example, will usually stand and start to walk with an hour of being born. A human baby will usually take at least a year. We are born premature, incomplete, uncoordinated.

16. Embryologists refer to the fact of the extension of human infancy as *foetalization* or pedomorphism (see Bolk, 1926 and Gould, 1977). This, it is argued, is what gives rise to the relatively larger and superior form of the human brain. Parts of the cortex in human beings are notably larger than in primates such as gorillas and chimpanzees. This is said to account for greater initiative and future orientation in human beings and, according to Lacan, might be understood as something akin to an intraorganic mirror, the locus of our imagining ourselves as well as our anticipatory projection of ourselves.

17. Lacan is working to capture a complex temporal logic here, what he refers to as a temporal dialectic. The child sees what it simultaneously takes to be itself but sees to be more coherent and complete than itself. Subsequently the child aspires to become this image it sees before it but, crucially, it is also then aspiring to become that in the image which was only ever imagined to be in the image. In this curious toing and froing, there is strictly speaking no beginning, no point of origin, no original or authentic self. The very formation of the individual, as an identity, is only ever something which would be posterior to this confrontation. Here we have the first echoes of Hegel in *The Mirror Stage*. The use of the term dialectic, the sense of an individual being formed in relation to history (78). These references ought to bring to mind Hegel's famous 'Master-Slave Dialectic'. This section of *The Phenomenology of Mind* concerns the advent of consciousness through the interaction of two beings. This is precisely what Lacan is trying to articulate with his theory of the mirror stage. As with Hegel, prior to the encounter, there is no full-consciousness. It is only through the encounter, with the other being, with the mirror image, that consciousness and an idea of self could be seen to emerge. Importantly, it is what *could be seen to* that is in play here. The formation of the individual is not something which is experience in history but rather

projected into history, where history itself is posited as an artifice into which the mistake of the ego is read.

This leads Lacan to one of the central declarations of the essay: 'the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation' (78). The mirror stage, he tells us, is a drama. In describing it as a drama, we should understand resonances of performance and action but also acting, artifice and scriptedness. The mirror stage is a construct, but it is a constructive construct. The movement of this drama is from insufficiency, that of infant motor incapacity but also the defining dehiscence of human life, to anticipation. Not to accomplishment. We are incomplete but the mirror offers us the promise of a completion to come. This instantiates the movement of our lives.

This experience is often reflected in fantasies and dreams both of incompleteness and completion. The notion of the body in pieces is a common enough one both in clinical experience and in culture. Children often draw themselves and others with limbs disconnected or, in the world of art, we might take the example of Hans Belmer with his curious but enduringly compelling dolls with malcomposed body parts. Similarly, culture abounds with images of the reinforced body, from Robocop to Batman. These images, both of fragmentation and orthopaedic reinforcement attest to Lacan's point here. Our identity is as fundamentally bodily as it is fundamentally impossible. The struggle to verify and maintain one's identity is destined to repeated failure and is, therefore, unending. Moreover, the identity we choose, the identity with which we so strongly identify, if we can express this in such a tautology, because it is not what we are, is necessarily alienating. We feel the need of the protective shield of an identity which is always other but, precisely because it is always other, we are alienated in wearing it. It functions then not simply as a protection but also as a constraint, a limitation. Our entire mental development is thus conditioned by the limited nature of the identity we adopt. Importantly here, it is not that we would somehow be better off were we to select a 'better' or less limiting identity. It is rather the fact of identity which is itself limiting. This adoption of a rigid identity can be understood as the rupture of the continuum of inside and outside and it is this, and the ill-

fitting nature of the identity so adopted, which necessarily then gives rise to an unending self-accounting. It cannot end because the / am not that.

18. From a clinical perspective, Lacan argues that fantasies of the body in pieces are indicative of internal aggressive disintegration. Such fantasies tend to manifest as ideas of disjointed limbs, internal organs presented on the outside of the body, burgeoning wings or battling internal forces. Lacan himself points to the quintessential example here as the work of Hieronymus Bosch, presumably referring to the triptych the Garden of Earthly Delights the central panel of which is dominated by a bisected, hollowed out torso whose arms become trees while little people climb inside him. Such schisms are apparent too even in the base bodily experience of psychotic and hysteric subjects.

19. The complex of this oscillation from insufficiency to anticipation means that the fantasy of the body in pieces is going to find its correlate in fantasies of completion. Thus, we also encounter the fantasy of the ego in dreams of fortresses and stadiums. Importantly Lacan draws our attention here to the fact that where there is ego, there is also necessarily id. The unconscious knows this. The point here is that we dream of fortification precisely because we are not fortified. It is a defence mechanism.

20. There is a danger in the recourse to the images Lacan has evoked here. Commonplace as these images are, they appear to suggest an entirely subjective experience which runs counter to the point Lacan is trying to make. Recall at the outset Lacan was clear that we should resist the lure of Cartesianism. That is to say, where for Descartes and much of modernity the subject is atomistic and self-enclosed, for Lacan such self-enclosure is never more than a fantasy. The stadium of the previous paragraph is a key metaphor here; the *stade* of the original French title which is usually translated as *stage* can also be translated as stadium. The self-enclosure of the Cartesian / is already a reaction formation against the experience of fragmentation and insufficiency. This being the case, the proliferation of repeated images in our culture should not be seen as coincidental subjective manifestations, the products of this or that artist's or patient's particular imagination. Rather, they should be

understood as articulations conditioned by a particular grammar, that of the unconscious. And the unconscious for Lacan is transindividual, not individual. In advocating a 'method of symbolic reduction' (79), Lacan is already advancing his emphasis on linguistics and the structure of the unconscious as like a language.

21. The process of the mirror identification can help to locate particular problems such as hysteria and obsession insofar as these would relate to different stages in the process. Importantly, Lacan is not appealing to any natural norm as all development requires a movement through the process and thus a move towards culture. In this sense, he is largely repeating Freud's points with regard to the psychosexual stages. Importantly, here Lacan indicates a sequential order to the emergence of different clinical structures. Different ego defences would give rise to what would be understood as different clinical structures, hysterical neurosis, obsessional neurosis, perversion and psychosis. He has already articulated the link between paranoia and the nascent formation of social identity through the notion of a constitutive paranoid knowledge. Here he suggests that this paranoid knowledge would emerge at a later point than obsessive inversion and that, in turn, would emerge at a later point than hysterical repression.

22. Here we come to what we might understand as a transition moment in the essay where Lacan talks of the end of the mirror stage. This would have to be understood to refer to the moment in infancy where misrecognition ushers in the process of identification. Lacan here refers to the image in the mirror as a counterpart, emphasising the alterity at the heart of this process. In identifying with this counterpart, as Lacan has already made clear, we do not have anything like a reduction to one. Rather, in the midst of identification we establish a relationship of jealousy comparable to the phenomenon of transitivity, i.e. the attribution of one's own psychic and physical experiences to other persons or things. Transitivity points to the fact that our outer-world or *Umwelt* is very much a part of what we are. This indissoluble connection between becoming inner- and outer-worlds points to the fact that the end of the infant mirror stage is the movement into socialisation.

23. As we come to find ourselves in a social world, we are forced to relate to ourselves and the world through the medium of the desire of the other. Again, we appear to be in Hegelian territory here. In Kojève's famous reading of the Master-Slave Dialectic the encounter is understood in terms of each player's desire to be desired by the other. In the world of psychoanalysis, the key example of this would be the Oedipus complex wherein the child largely relates to the desire of the mother. This should be understood in a number of ways. Not only does the child desire to be the object of the mother's desire it also comes to model its desire on the fact of the mother's desire. Beyond this, the child has to face the fact that it is never adequate to the mother's desire, she always desires something more, something else, something elsewhere, something other. This introduction of desire as opposed to instinctual needs means that the later present as threatening to the subject. Again, Lacan is emphasising the fact that for the human subject there is no natural. For a human child to mature it is necessary to abandon the domination by instinct and negotiate cultural, to negotiate desire.

24. The experience of the mirror stage Lacan has been describing up until this point appears, he suggests, to accord with the what Freud termed primary narcissism, i.e. an initial and ubiquitous self-love which reflects and allows our self-preservation instincts. Prior to and as detailed in Freud's famous 1914 paper 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' the name of Narcissus had been borrowed extensively to refer to auto-libidinal perversions (by Näcke in 1899) and psychological tendencies (by Ellis in 1898) and had already entered the psychoanalytic vocabulary by 1909 before Otto Rank's paper 'A Contribution to Narcissism' (1911). Ovid's tale of the fated youth who, entranced by the beauty of his own reflection in a stream, perishes and, in the moment of death is transformed into a flower had already echoed through Western literature and, in doing so, had come to be equated rather simply with self love. In constructing his idea of the mirror stage, Lacan is very obviously drawing a line back to Ovid but in so doing he wants to emphasise the scopic dimension which seems to be lost in the reduction of Narcissus to a shorthand for self-love or self-infatuation. There is, he claims, a semantic latency in the choice of the term *narcissism* in that, appealing as it does to the story of a youth entrapped in the gaze of his own reflection. Already, he implies,

psychoanalysis and its forbearers pointed to the theory he is only now extrapolating in full; the theory of the mirror stage.

Ovid's tale from *Metamorphosis* also pre-echoes the Freudian notion of the death drive. Narcissus seeks stasis and remains locked gazing at his own reflection until death takes him and he is transformed into the perennial flower that bears his name. The mirror stage, similarly, describes the snare of narcissistic libido, a self-love which excludes the other. The cathexis here has its counterpoint in an unabating aggressivity towards the other. Even apparently altruistic acts are, Lacan, argues imbued with aggressive intent. In the simplest of Samaritan scenarios, a hierarchy is established which presents the Samaritan, the one bestowing help, in a favourable light. There is an unavoidable egoism at play here but also, Lacan argues, an aggressive dimension. To bestow charity is already to look down. This allows us to appreciate that Lacan is also here positing an anti-consequentialist ethics. We need to look beyond the superficial effect of a deed and understand the narcissism from which it springs.

25. In isolating the phenomenon of narcissism, Lacan argues, psychoanalysts encountered a negative, destructive core to human experience. This does not seem so different to the then, at the time of Lacan's writing, fashionable stance of existentialism. Lacan had begun the essay with a swipe at Sartre and the existentialists and here he takes this opposition up again.

26. So, like Sartre, Lacan is asserting the negativity of self-experience, the idea that I never fit, the idea of the disjuncture between the self and the world. The problem with existentialism, however, is that it does not go far enough. Sartre and his ilk, as alluded to in the opening paragraph of the essay, are still caught in the trap of the self-identical *cogito* and, like Descartes, they equate self with consciousness. The problem with this, for Lacan, is that effectively this means equating the self with the ego. The core message of the 'Mirror Stage' essay is to describe how the ego is established on the basis of a misrecognition. Far from being the site of autonomy or something like an authentic kernel, the ego is nothing

but a mistake. This would then mean that the autonomy of the self which is so central for the existentialist project is, from Lacan's perspective, grounded on an illusion.

In seeking to combine psychoanalytic teachings with the existentialist perspective, the work of figures like Otto Rank and Viktor Frankl is scarred with a fatal contradiction. If the self is only ever produced through and on the basis of an encounter with something other, then the always partial and distorted idea of self which introjected cannot be the ground of an autonomous being in the world.

27. Modern life, for Lacan, is characterised by a deadening utilitarian perspective. We should understand this both in the Millian sense of a domination by a consequentialist striving for maximum happiness as well as in the simpler sense, already implied in Bentham and Mill's writings, that the world can and should be understood in terms of use functions. This reduction of the world to utilitarianism has an obviously devastating effect on man's relation to the world in which he finds himself. For the existentialists, the condition of modern man is not unlike life in a concentration camp; dehumanised, debased, unfree. This picture of contemporary life is illustrated through a number of existentialist text which attest to the popularity of the perspective but which also all illustrate a profound contradiction. As represented in Viktor Frankl's 1946 account of life in an actual concentration camp, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the existentialist perspective suggests that true freedom can be found even, and especially, in the most apparently constrained of circumstances. Sartre's own *Nausea* conveys the idea of the individual's commitment in the face of his impotence against the world. Similarly, Henry Miller's *Tropic* books present the individual's pursuit of a form of freedom through the idealisation of sex. A number of Dostoyevsky's characters resort to suicide, most significantly, in this context, Kirillov from *The Devils* (1872) who maintains that the only true way to overcome fear of death is to embrace suicide. Finally, Lacan evokes Camus's *Outsider*, drawing a link back to Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic and the notion that one can only attain full consciousness through engaging in a battle to the death with the other. Each of the examples illustrates a core contradiction. Frankl's freedom is clearly rather constrained. In much the same way, Sartre's narrator is constrained by the world in which he finds himself. What is perhaps most remarkable about the sexual pursuits of

Miller's narrative alter-ego is the alienation and distance the encounters evoke. The brute contradiction of self-realisation through suicide is perhaps self evident. In The final reference to Hegel underscores the irony here. In Hegel's myth the battle which actually results in death is a literal deadend. If the potential master actually kills the potential slave, then both lose.

28. Insofar as psychoanalysis refuses the reduction of the ego to perception-consciousness and sees it stretching beyond the reach of the reality principle, it is radically incommensurate with existentialism. Rather, psychoanalysis suggests, as Lacan is suggesting throughout this essay, that the ego is essentially an effect of *meconnaissance*, of a process of misrecognition. As such, the dominant character of the self is going to be denial. When this unconscious dimension manifests, it is apparent that the ego is not all, as the force of the *id* is felt.

29. Caught in an inadequate misrecognition, the contemporary subject retreats into the death drive. This is not, contrary to common interpretation, defined by risk taking and destruction, it is not concerned with white water rafting, bungee jumping and war, but rather the death drive is primarily concerned with repetition and stasis. The death drive is inertia, the tendency towards nothing, stillness, death, repeating. In the mirror, we are seduced and captivated by the image in which we misrecognise ourselves and cannot move. Such stasis and captivation can be found in quintessential images of the madhouse; the patient who rocks themselves endlessly, catatonia, the thousand-yard stare. But, Lacan argues, it is not only evident in the madhouse, it is evident in the madness which is our society, a madness which is characterised by a 'sound and fury' (80) and, lest we forget, sound and fury 'signify nothing' (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*).

30. For psychoanalysis, the mad - the neurotic, the psychotic - offer an insight into the apparently normal. There is no real normal for Lacan. Even more than Freud, he sees us all as beset with 'issues'. Encounters with neurotic and psychotic analysands, Lacan argues, betray something important about the human condition, something which is less evident in

the apparently sane world, characterised as it is by denial and a deadening of passion. This goes some way to explaining the popularity of existentialism compared with the hostility society feels towards psychoanalysis. Existentialism perpetuates a comfortable fantasy. It is psychoanalysis, and particularly Lacan's version of psychoanalysis, which demands a difficult confrontation.

31. In conclusion, Lacan's theory allows us to grasp the complex relation of nature and culture and how we come to find ourselves in this already cultured and linguistically mediated way. We are enchained by the imaginary captivation of ego identification but it is fundamentally a form of alienation. Only love, of which psychoanalysis is a form, can help. The key mode of operation of psychoanalysis is the transference effect which Freud equates with love. Transference is the connection between people and thus the best alternative to crippling and deluding alienation.

32. We should not delude ourselves here however and see the aim of psychoanalysis as some happy cure which leads us all to a lovely life. An easy cure is always a dangerous illusion. The goal of psychoanalysis is rather a journey of discovery and acceptance of our 'darker' impulses, our aggression as well as our love. This is no utopian quest Lacan is inviting us on.

33. Lacanian psychoanalysis works by taking the subject to the point of confronting its condition, the mistake of the ego, the illusions of identification and thus, ultimately, to the point of what Lacan calls 'subjective destitution' (Lacan, 1967/1995). This, however, Lacan tells us, is only really the beginning. From there it can never be anything other than the subject's responsibility.

References

Billig, M. (2006) 'Lacan's Misuse of Psychology: Evidence, Rhetoric and the Mirror Stage' *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(4): 1-26.

Bolk, L. (1926) *Das Problem der Menschwerdung*. Jena. Fischer.

Caillois, R. (1948/2003) 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' in Caillois, R. (2003) *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*. Ed. Claudine Frank. Duke University Press. pp.89 - 103

Camus, A. (1942/2000) *The Outsider*. London. Penguin.

Descartes, R. (1641/1993) *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. D. A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Descartes, R. (1649) *Les Passions de l'âme*, Henry Le Gras, Paris,

Dostoyevsky, F. (1872/1973) *The Devils*. London. Penguin.

Ellis, H. (1898/2011) *Autoeroticism: A Psychological Study*. London. Tebbo.

Frankl, V. (1946/2004) *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York. Rider.

Freud, S. (1914/2001) 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works.

Gould, S. J. (1977) *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*. Cambridge. Belknap.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1841/1967) *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie. New York: Harper and Row.

Kant, I. (1781/2007) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. M. Weigelt. London. Penguin.

Köhler, W. (1925) *The Mentality of Apes*. Trans. E. Winter. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.

Köhler, W. (1929). *Gestalt psychology*. New York: Liveright.

Lacan, J. (1949/1966) *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique* in Lacan, J. (1966) *Écrits*. Paris: Editions du. Seuil.

Lacan, J. (1949/2007) 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in Lacan, J. (2007) *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Trans. B. Fink. New York. Norton.

Lacan, J. (1967/1995) 'Proposition of 9th October 1967 on the Psychoanalyst of the School'. Trans. R. Grigg. Analysis Number Six, 1995.

Lacan, J. (1981/1993) *The Psychoses: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III, 1955-1956*. Trans. R. Grigg. London: Routledge.

Leibniz (1714/1992) 'Monadology' in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*. Trans. D. Garber and R. Ariew. New York. Hackett.

- Levi-Strauss, C. (1958/1963) *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf. New York. Basic Books.
- Mathews, L.H. (1939) 'Visual stimulation and ovulation in pigeons. *Proceedings of the Royal Society*. B, 126, pp.557-560
- Miller, H. (1934) *Tropic of Cancer*. Paris. Obelisk.
- Miller, H. (1938) *Tropic of Capricorn*. Paris. Obelisk.
- Näcke, Paul (1899). 'Die sexuellen Perversitäten in der Irrenanstalt'. *Wiener klinische Rundschau*, No. 27–30.
- Nobus, D. (1998) 'Life and Death in the Glass: A New Look at the Mirror Stage' in Nobus, D. (ed.) (1998) *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York. Other Press. pp.101-138
- Ovid (0008/2004) *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*. Trans. D. Raeburn. London. Penguin.
- Sartre, J.P. (1938/2000) *Nausea*. Trans. R. Baldick. London. Penguin.
- Sartre, J.P. (1946/1973) *Existentialism and Humanism*. Trans. C. Macomber. London. Methuen.
- Shakespeare, W. (1623/2007) *Macbeth*. London. Penguin.
- Roudinesco, E. (2003) 'The Mirror Stage: An Obliterated Archive' in Rabaté, J. (2003) *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. pp. 25-34
- Vanheule, S. (2011) *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective*. Basingstoke. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Wallon, H. (1931), 'Comment se développe chez l'enfant la notion de corps propre,' *Journal de psychologie*. November–December, 1931. pp. 705–48;