

Summary of Lacan's *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*

In his paper *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience*, published in his book *Écrits*, Jacques Lacan attempts to understand the experience of an infant looking in the mirror and how it relates to the child's concepts of "self," moving, as Dr. Tamise van Pelt, retired professor of English from Idaho State University, says, in "a development sequence through a mirror 'stage' into a symbolic order [...]" (van Pelt). Lacan believes that the experience is helpful in understanding more specifically the construction of self, which Lacan refers to as "I." Because of this, he also believes that it completely invalidates the Cartesian concept of *cogito ergo sum*, the belief that the ability to think proves and, by derivation, forms a unified self (1285). According to John Zuern, associate professor of English at the University of Hawaii, in Lacan's view, "any self-knowledge is to some degree an illusion" ("Lacan").

Lacan was fascinated by how children between the ages of six and 18 months engage in a kind of self-discovery play by looking in a mirror. He gives an archetypal example of a child in a walker to help him (and the child is always "him") learn to walk, which also restrains the child's movements and holds him upright, giving him the best possible view of the mirror. The child notices his movements in the mirror, and in so doing, realizes that he is seeing a reflection of himself. As a result, he forms his first impressions of himself, both in terms of his appearance and his physical mastery over the world around him. Lacan calls this stage of child development the "Mirror Stage" (1285).

Lacan believes that this stage is a part of a machine-like process of our psychological growth that reinforces his belief in “paranoiac knowledge” (1286), which is to say that he believes the formation of self that we experience while looking in a mirror is part of our drive to make sense of our world, creating a rational view of the world which, in Lacan’s opinion, isn’t so easily ordered.

For Lacan, when we look in the mirror, we “assume an image” – namely, a way of picturing ourselves (1286). Yet, because we have not yet learned language or learned to take on the images that the rest of society has for us, it is the very first such image that we take on and is a unique experience. All other self-images occur after we have learned language and started interacting with others, and so all other self-images are constructs of the *other*.

The *I* that we are experiencing, because it is untainted, is, Lacan believes, what Freud would call the “Ideal-I” (or “Ideal-Ich” or “Ideal-Ego”) (1286). But because this *I* is formed in a mirror, it is a fantasy, an unreal image that only seems real. As Dr. Allen Thiher, Professor of French Literature at the University of Wisconsin, explains, “the ego exists for us only in the illusory identifications the imaginary offers, while our ‘authentic being’ is found in the absent world of signifiers, constituted by the Other, over which we have no control. In a sense we live in fictions [...]” (Thiher). The result is that, as we strive for paranoiac knowledge, for completion of our self-image, we have partially constructed it with a fantasy and thus it will always remain a fantasy. The irony of human development, then, is that we will forever remain broken, unable to fulfill our desire for rational order.

The case is further compounded by the fact that our self-image is one of incompleteness, thanks to the fact that we see ourselves in the mirror and attempt to move, but our movements are awkward, jerky, and untrained. This, Lacan believes, is a result of “*specific prematurity of*

*birth*” (1288). While other animals are born and can walk and run within hours, humans must be carefully tended by their parents for years, thus showing that when we come from the womb we are not fully developed as other animals are and, thus, are premature. Since we’re already forming ideas of self while in this premature stage, we must also adopt our awkwardness into our *I*. Lacan believes this is the source of dreams involving such things as “disjointed limbs” and “growing wings,” the idea that our own body is in some way broken or “fragmented” (1288). The *I*, however, is represented in dreams by images of strength and security and, at the same time, images of waste (1288). This, he believes, shows that while our *I* always seeks paranoid knowledge, it also knows that this perfect self is a future possibility, and not the present reality, which is imperfect.

Zuern says that this understanding of the mirror stage gives us a way to diagnose patients, as the moment of moving out of the mirror stage, which involves the taking on of external images (the “social *I*”) onto what had previously been an entirely self-formed *I* (the “specular *I*”) (“Lacan”). After this point, Lacan says, the human desire is no longer for things of the self, but for input from other people (1289). We further begin to take on the social norms that make requirements against our desires, thus creating danger for ourselves (1289). Zuern says that the classic example of this, and the one Lacan uses, is the Oedipal Complex, for the general social norm that creates “[t]he prohibition of incest [...]” (“Lacan”). Lacan says that understanding this problem for the *I* helps us to understand the power struggle between the “libido and the sexual libido” (1289) which means, basically, our attempts to grow and improve versus our desires toward self-gratification. Even things such as “Samaritan” ideals, which appear altruistic, are not. Zuern says these acts help create a “gratifying vision of ourselves, for example, as saintly, self-sacrificing people” (“Lacan”). This concept is very similar to the Nietzschean belief that

altruism is merely a disguise for an attempt to gain power over others, although Lacan would instead see this as a response to the influence of others. Taking on such images from others causes “a speaking subject” to be “decentered from an ideal ego whose unattainable image of perfection the child narcissistically wishes to find reflected by others, especially the mother” (van Pelt).

The entire problem creates an existential image – that we are identified by otherness and not self. Because of this, it’s easy to fall into what Lacan sees as the trap of existentialist philosophy. However, according to Zuern, this creates the problem that the consciousness must be “self-aware,” but Zuern also says that Lacan does not believe in self-awareness; instead, the *I* is formed from “*méconnaissances*” – misunderstandings that cause us to have an image of ourselves that is an illusion, and that we do not really know the real *us* because of this illusion. (“Lacan”).

In the end, while Lacan believes this understanding of the mirror stage can help aid in psychoanalysis, can help us to figure out where we went wrong, he believes that the limit of psychoanalysis is similar to leading a horse to water – the analyst can accompany the patient on the journey, can ask him the proper questions to help him see his subconscious desires, but cannot force him to make that final discovery, that paradigm shift that helps him to see what his own true nature is (1290). This is the unfortunate limit of psychology. According to Zuernt, “we might say that the patient ‘comes to terms with desire [...]’” (“Lacan”) rather than actually understanding it.