

SITUATING LACAN'S MIRROR STAGE IN THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

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The mirror stage is perhaps the most famous concept of Jacques Lacan's work and thought, and a sizable literature discussing it has developed in the seventy years since Lacan introduced the notion. What new insight, what original construal, critique or apology of the mirror stage could be provided at this point? Lacan's theories have been set to work outside of psychoanalysis proper, in philosophy, cultural studies, film theory, and other disciplines, and the mirror stage has been transferred to those fields, in some cases employed positively, even positivistically, in other cases, set up only to be knocked down. The mirror stage is frequently employed in isolation from the rest of Lacan's work, with the unfortunate effect of distorting the former by substituting it for the latter. Given that context, there is some merit to situating the mirror stage in relation to Lacan's larger work and thought.

That is not an entirely novel project, given that more systematic approaches to Lacan already exist. We have practicing Lacanian psychoanalysts, drawing on clinical experience as well as theory, to thank for works situating the mirror stage in the context of Lacan's thought. Cultural critics have likewise attempted to engage and apply Lacan's work in a less fragmentary manner. In addition, scholars uncommitted or less committed to these two disciplinary projects carry out a more traditional hermeneutical task of attempting to explain what Lacan's deliberately difficult works are actually saying. There is still room for additional study of the mirror stage's role and significance from this perspective. Practicing psychoanalysts indicate how Lacan's theories work out in actual analysis and treatment, but because of that important focus, less attention gets paid to the more general features of Lacan's theory of greater interest to non-practitioners. Cultural critics typically possess different preoccupations peculiar to their projects, some useful and informative, others of dubious value and validity. In general, Lacanian theory gets impressed into service for cultural critique by those on the Left. In the better cultural critics, ideological biases, assumptions, and focus on topics of particular interest merely give one-sided readings of Lacan and contestable applications to contemporary society, politics and culture. One could do much worse than that in theory, and in worse cases, we are indeed treated to spectacles of theorists (mis)using Lacanian categories and terminology to accuse what they decide to stigmatize, lapsing into discourses of quite aggressive and paranoid phantasy themselves, spectacles quite informative in ways unintended by their authors. Like Lacanian psychoanalysts, Lacanian cultural critics can tell us something about the mirror stage, but not as much as one not sharing their preoccupations might like.

What is the significance of Lacan's mirror stage? How does it fit into his larger theory? Does the mirror stage actually have anything to contribute to our understanding of human beings, their relationships, human society and culture? Does this contribution depend on the mirror stage being situated in Lacan's larger theory? These are all

philosophical, specifically hermeneutical, questions, and they have been raised and addressed by some philosophical exegetes of Lacan. This study also aims to answer these questions, and the approach taken is a straightforward and one of looking first primarily to the deliberately dense and difficult article, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," then to references in Lacan's much more systematic seminars, following these references into other Lacanian themes explained in these seminars, in particular the relations and roles of the imaginary and the symbolic registers. Although other seminars touch on these matters, the first and second seminars contain the most and the most useful discussions, so those are the ones examined here.

The mirror stage article is short, and the mirror stage itself does not last long. Their mutual significance (with exceptions as discussed below) does not reside so much in what is presumed to happen with a child during this interval of time and development, but rather in what study of the stage reveals about the later life of the Lacanian human subject in relation to its ego, and its others in the imaginary and symbolic orders. Put in a more basic way, the mirror stage's significance is what of the mirror stage is preserved and transformed after the mirror stage. As he says later in Seminar I, "it isn't the appearance of this behavior at six months which is the most important thing, but rather its dissolution at eighteen months" (Lacan, *Seminar I* 168). Lacan calls the mirror stage "*an identification*, in the full sense that analysis give to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan, *Ecrits 2*). Perceiving, acting, suffering, engaging its environing objects, coming to know them and itself, the human infant takes in images and transforms them, and some of these images bear greater importance than others, particularly those of other human beings. The transformation casts these images into what Lacan calls the imaginary register or imaginary order, an order common to all animal life but fundamentally different in important ways for the human animal.

The imaginary order is the realm of the subject's fantasy, a primarily narcissistic realm composed from and through affectively invested images, of *imagos*, images of central importance in the life of the subject, even, we might say, the world of the subject, since, as Lacan mentions, the *imago's* function is "to establish a relation between the organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*" (*Ecrits 4*). As Lacan indicates later, the imaginary order also includes the objects discussed by object-relations theory. Paradoxically, the imaginary order is a necessity for apprehending any reality not only outside the subject but even within or of the subject. Put more rigorously, a dimension of affectively invested or cathected fantasy, of images differing from but reflecting reality (observable by another) always and necessarily mediates reality, not only for human beings, but even for other animals.

One *imago* is particularly pertinent during the mirror stage, the "assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage", "the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power" (*Ecrits 2*). Five features are of importance. First, what Lacan says the mirror stage shows us is a "primordial form", the "Ideal-I" (*Ecrits 2*). The child comes to identify itself with the image of its body, an unfragmented image it possesses neither in its visual perception (since it cannot see its

entire form as a unity) or in its agency (since it is still largely helpless, radically dependent, uncoordinated in motor functions). This image is actually an imaginary one, one transformed from the infant's reality, mediating that reality. The "mirror" of the mirror stage is only an index allowing us to understand what takes place with the child, which can, in fact, does take place without a mirror. The mirror itself does not have an effect, it does not do anything, and it does not exert an agency. Instead, the child is exerting its agency by play, identification, and play in the imaginary, allowing it not only to assimilate an external reality, but also the rudiments of a human self.

The examples from animal ethology Lacan provides pertain to animals seeing an other of their own kind. Their own image in a mirror can function as a substitute as can a constructed, often quite rudimentary, image of their own kind, because what is key is the image of its own kind. The human child likewise needs contact with the specifically human form, but develops something quite different from other animals. The essay "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" develops this further. The mirror stage involves a "first captation by the image in which the first stage of the dialectic of identifications can be discerned. It is linked to a *Gestalt* phenomenon, the child's very early perception of the human form. . . . But what demonstrates the phenomenon of recognition, which involves subjectivity, are the signs of triumphant jubilation and playful discovery that characterize, from the sixth month, the child's encounter with his image in the mirror" (*Ecrits* 18).

In the mirror stage, "the subject originally identifies himself with the visual *Gestalt* of his own body", a "salutary imago" (*Ecrits* 18-19), not with the actual mirror image *per se*, which can always be lacking, but with an image generated in the imaginary order. The image of its own body the infant identifies with possesses its interest because it is the projected, anticipated ideal unity of the infant's own body, but also simply because it is a human body. "It is this captation by the *imago* of the human form. . . . which, between the ages of six months and two and a half years, dominates the entire dialectic of the child's behavior in the presence of his similars" (*Ecrits* 19). This leads to the second feature.

During the mirror stage, the ego is first coming into being, the system Lacan later calls "that set of denials, of dams, of inhibitions, of fundamental fantasies which orient and direct the subject" (*Seminar I* 17). The Ideal-I "situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction," (*Ecrits* 2) i.e. in the imaginary. The ego, in Lacanian theory, is not identical to the human subject. It is something imaginary, fictive, projected as more complete and unified than the subject actually is, and the mirror stage inaugurates this, in part because the child produces its own image, in part because this imaginary but necessary, in fact indispensable construct is bound up in the rest of the imaginary order, and especially with the other. As Lacan explains in Seminar I, "The relation of the ego to the other, the relation to the subject to this other himself, to this fellow being in relation to whom he is initially formed, is an essential structure of the human constitution" (*Seminar I* 52), and in Seminar II, "[T]he ego is never just the subject. . . it is essentially a relation to the other. . . it finds its place and fulcrum in the other. All the objects are considered from the standpoint of the ego" (*Ecrits* 177).

This is the third feature, that during the mirror stage, the image of the body is far from the only resident of the infant's imaginary order. In fact, in normal development during that time, the imaginary order is becoming progressively more complex, richer, possessed of a greater number of interrelated objects, most important of which is the object of the other. The human ego, according to Lacan, is constituted only through its human other, the counterpart, the rival, even one's own double. Identification with the other is not only possible, but also common, even necessary, and this takes place not only through mimicry, "those gestures of fictitious actions by which a subject reconstitutes the imperfect effort of the other's gesture. . .synchronies of spectacular captation" (*Ecrits* 18), but also through conflict, transference to, aggressivity towards, even confusion with other human beings, or rather with their images with which the infant is progressively populating its inner life. The mirror stage ends in the child's "identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy," and this begins "the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (*Ecrits* 5).

The fourth feature is that all of this takes place because human beings, unlike other animals, are instinctually underdetermined. The human imaginary is more fragmented and fissured, much less strictly related to its corresponding reality. "[H]uman knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of desire" (*Ecrits* 3), and this is because, as Lacan says, human being has "an organic insufficiency in his human reality," a "real *specific prematurity of birth* in man" (*Ecrits* 4). This leads finally to the fifth feature, which is that, although Lacan does not name it as such in the article, what he will soon later call the symbolic order is the terminus of the mirror stage. The symbolic order partially compensates for human prematurity, diminished instinctual channeling of desire, underdetermination of the human imaginary and its relation to reality. It is the symbolic order that actually situates the mirror stage, keeps the imaginary order from collapsing into pure narcissism, allows the possibly of human maturation, in which the project of psychoanalysis plays a part. If one had to summarize Lacan's effort in one phrase it would be: an ongoing project of exploration and exploitation of the symbolic order, and its relations with the imaginary order and the real.

His seminars clarify these relations. One matter Seminar I addresses is what happens when the child fails to be incorporated to the symbolic order, introducing two cases of children in which the normal development of the imaginary and the ego, and the movement into the symbolic order did not take place until after treatment. Melanie Klein's patient inhabits a world that is unmediated reality, and precisely for that reason, an unhuman world, disconnected. "[T]here is neither other nor ego for him, just a reality pure and simple", but this is not "that infinitely more complex real which is the human real" (*Seminar I* 69). Rosine Lefort's patient likewise is trapped in the real. Lacan employs visual models involving mirrors to explain the symbolic order's role in these cases. A curved mirror allows images to be generated in interplay of the imaginary and the real. The condition required for this is that the viewing subject be situated in the right place vis-a-vis the curved mirror and the objects being mirrored. Given that condition, a world can be established, "in front of the eye looking, in which the imaginary can include the real, and by the same token, fashion it, in which the real can also include, and by the same token, locate the imaginary." The condition is one depending on the symbolic order. "[I]n the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such as results

from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject. . . is essentially characterized by its place in the symbolic world" (*Seminar I* 80). Lacan's view is that in these cases, the children do not have an unconscious, and they have not developed egos. Using his visual model, "because of the poor position of the eye, the ego quite simply doesn't appear. . . the subject remains in a reduced reality, with a similarly reduced imaginary baggage" (*Seminar I* 88). These subjects seem to have failed in the development of the ego at the mirror stage, and have only the most rudimentary engagement in the symbolic order. As he puts it, "what we call the real world, which is only a humanized, symbolized world. . . can only be constituted when a series of encounters have occurred in the right place" (*Seminar I* 87).

Lacan plays with the notion that in these cases, what happens is not so much that the subjects simply lack something and thereby fail to develop, but rather that the kind of lack characteristic of human beings is for some reason unable to be productively addressed and resolved. At one point, he raises a paradox about the ego that "if too developed, it stops all development, but in developing, it reopens the door to reality" (*Seminar I* 74). Again, what differentiates human beings radically from other animals is the prematurity of their birth, their greatly diminished instincts, and what compensates for this in human beings. Development of an ego, made possible by going through a mirror stage, is one of these compensations. Another is the symbolic order. Both of these involve and develop through reference to the other.

Seminar I indicates how the human imaginary differs from the animal. "For the animal there is a limited number of pre-established correspondences between its imaginary structure and whatever interests it in its *Umwelt*. . . For man the other has a captivating value, on account of the anticipation that is represented by the unitary image as it is perceived either in the mirror or in the entire reality of the fellow being" (*Seminar I* 125). In Seminar II, he adds that human beings lack preformed instinctual paths, and have to learn practically everything, so that in humans, "the *Gestalten*, the preformed images" develop through "the particular configuration we call consciousness, in as much as the imaginary function of the ego comes into play. Man gets to see his reflection from the point of view of the other" (Lacan, *Seminar II* 112). Because of the human lack of determinateness typical to other animals' instinctual lives, what is characteristic of human instinctual life is "disarray. . . fragmentedness. . . fundamental discordance. . . essential lack of adaptation. . . anarchy, which opens up every possibility of displacement, that is of error" (*Seminar II* 169). This is precisely where symbolic relation assumes its central importance: "the power of naming objects structures the perception itself. The *percipi* of man can only be sustained within a zone of nomination. If objects had only a narcissistic relation with the subject, they would only ever be perceived in a momentary fashion" (*Seminar II* 169).

In fact, all of what takes place in the imaginary order, in the experience of the subject, in the development of the ego, in the affective investment of objects, images, the relation to the other, is situated by the symbolic order. "The symbolic relation is constituted as early as possible, even prior to the fixation of the self image of the subject, prior to the structuring image of the ego, introducing the dimension of the subject into the world. . . .

The imaginary experience is inscribed in the register of the symbolic as early on as you can think it" (*Seminar II* 257). In infancy even at and before the mirror stage, the child is already involved in the symbolic order in a rudimentary way, through the call for food, for comfort, for a satisfaction that, as Lacan points out already involves the other and the symbolic order to some extent. Even in the infant's dependency, "this relation to the other is named, and is so by the subject" (*Seminar I* 155). He uses the example of the maternal response to the call, and the example of the naming of the father, both of which involve the infant in a network of relations beyond the immediate familial relationships. "[E]ven before I am capable of pronouncing the words father and son. . . the entire human system around us already defines us, with all the impending consequences that that brings with it, as father and son" (*Seminar I* 156).. It is the symbolic order, not simply the beginning of the ego, the generation of the Ideal-I, that allows a human child to take on, develop, to have a stable identity. "[T]he subject sets itself up as operating, as human, as I, from the moment the symbolic system appears" (*Seminar II* 52).

"The imaginary economy has meaning, we gain some purchase on it, only in so far as it is transcribed into the symbolic order, where a ternary relation is imposed," Lacan says, prompting the question: What is this ternary relation? "It is in relation to another subject that his relations with this object have their meaning, and by the same token their value. Inversely, if he has relations with this object, it is because a subject other than himself has relations with this object, and they can both name it, in an order different from that of the real" (*Seminar II* 255). The narcissism inherent to the imaginary order, to the ego's affective relations with objects is not entirely impermeable to the desire of the other, and this other is not merely the imaginary other, the correspondent of the ego, but other beings inhabiting the same symbolic order.

Lacan again uses a visual model of curved and plane mirrors to explain the relation between the imaginary and the symbolic. Seeing and having clear images depends on one's position, but in addition to the opposed possibilities of having no image or having a clear image, there is also the possibility of a less clear image. "[W]hether you see the image more or less clearly depends on the inclination of the mirror." If the mirror is inclined the wrong way, it affects the image for the spectator, and Lacan suggests that "this represents the uneasy accommodation of the imaginary in man." He then suggests that "the inclination of the plane mirror is governed by the voice of the other. This doesn't happen at the level of the mirror stage, but it happens subsequently through our overall relation with other – the symbolic relation" (*Seminar I* 140). What this means is that the symbolic relations, the place(s) one occupies in the symbolic order "determines the greater or lesser degree of perfection, of completeness, of approximation, of the imaginary." Lacan goes further, making another adjustment to his model. "Think of the mirror as a pane of glass. You'll see yourself in the glass and you'll see the objects beyond it. That's exactly how it is—it's a coincidence between certain images and the real" (*Seminar I* 141). So, the symbolic order integrates and regulates not only the imaginary, including the ego, its objects, and its others, but also the very interplay between the imaginary and the real.

The subject's initiation, participation, and engagement with other subjects in the symbolic allows integration of the affectively charged imaginary register, integration and regulation

that cannot take place in the imaginary alone. During Seminar I, Lacan discusses this at length, highlighting the absolutely central importance of the symbolic. "Before desire learns to recognize itself. . . through the symbol, it is seen solely in the other." This poses a problem, since, "[a]t first, before language, desire exists solely in the single plane of the imaginary relation of the specular stage, projected, alienated in the other" (*Seminar I* 170). Referring to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* dialectic of self-consciousness, Lacan argues that this condition can meet with no satisfactory resolution. Even the destruction or disappearance of the other does not provide satisfaction of the subject's desire. The mirror stage's achievement in the order of the imaginary must be brought properly into the symbolic.

The relation of the subject to his *Urbild*, his *Idealich* [Ideal-I], through which he enters into the imaginary function and learns to recognize himself as form, can always see-saw. Each time the subject apprehends himself as form and as ego, each time that he constitutes himself in his status, in his stature, in his static, his desire is projected outside. From whence arrives the impossibility of all human coexistence.

But, thank God, the human subject inhabits the world of the symbol that is to say a world of others who can speak. That is why his desire is susceptible to the mediation of recognition. Without which every human function would simply exhaust itself in the unspecified wish for the destruction of the other as such. (*Seminar I* 171)

The involvement of the symbolic not only allows desire to be mediated by language, by other(s), both determinate actually existing others and the Other whose discourse the unconscious is. It also allows the objects of the imaginary to be further developed, or as Lacan says, "in the phenomenon of the other, something appears which once again allows the subject to reproject, to recomplete, to feed. . . the image of the *Idealich*. . . the jubilant assumption of the mirror stage is retrieved along similar lines" (*Seminar I* 171).

This leads desire beyond mere narcissistic identification, beyond only temporarily satisfactory coerced recognition, to the possibility of what Lacan is willing to call love, which in its affectivity does draw upon the imaginary, and can only take place within the structure afforded by a humanly constituted symbolic order.

A creature needs some reference to the beyond of language, to a pact, to a commitment which constitutes him, strictly speaking, as an other, a reference included in the general, or, to be more exact, universal system of interhuman symbols. No love can be functionally realizable in the human community, save by means of a specific pact, which, whatever the form it takes, always tends to become isolated off into a specific function, at one and the same time within language and outside of it. That is what we call the function of the sacred, which is beyond the imaginary relation. (*Seminar I* 174)

At this point, now that it has been established that Lacan's mirror stage and the imaginary register it takes place in is normally situated by the much vaster symbolic order, readers

less familiar with that aspect of Lacan's thought could wish for additional discussion and clarification of that concept. Situating the mirror stage in theory requires some theoretical exposition of what situates it. To be extremely brief, since as noted earlier, exploration of the symbolic order is the theme of nearly all Lacan's work, I will simply note four features of the symbolic order: its composition, complexity, comprehensiveness, and contingency.

What is the composition of the symbolic order? One might jokingly ask what does not enter into the composition of the symbolic order, because as noted earlier "what we call the real world. . . is only a humanized, symbolized world" (*Seminar I* 87). It is the order of language, and everything connected with language. It is the order of human relations and institutions, a few revelatory examples of which are familial relations, economic relations, and the type of fundamental normativity Lacan calls "the law". As he puts it in *Seminar I*, "the symbolic order is what is most elevated in man, and what isn't in man, but elsewhere," (*Seminar I* 116) which indicates an important point, namely that subjects occupy places in the symbolic order, they are constituted as human through these overlapping, interrelated, and intersecting places, but the symbolic order exceeds any particular subject or group of subjects. Providing a gloss on his famous *dictum* "the unconscious is the discourse of the other," Lacan clarifies: "This discourse of the other is not the discourse of the abstract other, of the other in the dyad. . . it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father, for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce. . . . because I am obliged to pick up the discourse he bequeathed to me" (*Seminar I* 89). The symbolic order is complex:

extraordinarily intricate, marked as it is by this . . . property of criss-crossing. . . . [E]very easily isolable linguistic symbol is not only at one with the totality, but is cut across and constituted by a series of overflowings, of oppositional overdeterminations which place it at one and the same time in several registers

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It is precisely on these ambiguities, on these riches already involved in the symbolic system as it has been constituted by the tradition in which we individuals take our places, far more than we can spell out or learn of it. . . . (*Seminar I* 53-4)

The portion of the symbolic intricated within an individual subject is also complex, and Lacan advises that the "symbolic constellation dwelling in the subject's unconscious. . . should always be conceived of as structured, in accordance with a complex order" (*Seminar I* 65).

Along with the complexity of the symbolic order goes its comprehensiveness. The symbolic order, by definition, exceeds any of the human subjects within it, since it "isn't constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols. . . . However small the number of symbols which you might conceive of as constituting the emergence of the symbolic function as such in human life, they imply the totality of everything that is

human. (*Seminar II* 29) It can be usefully thought of as an overlapping set of symbolic systems, some of which can be partially grasped, represented, and understood. They can be dealt with abstractly, in isolation from each other, and from the human subjects involved with them, and they can be adequately, but never entirely grasped in their entirety, since they are all part of the vaster symbolic order. To use the example of the law: "by definition, no one is taken to be ignorant of the law, but it is never understood, for no one can grasp it in its entirety," no subject has "a complete vision of what it is in this totality of the law that has a hold on him" (*Seminar II* 127) "Man is always in the position of never completely understanding the law, because no man can master the law of discourse in its entirety" (128).

Conflicts arise within the symbolic order, since sub-systems of it, applying to the same subjects, but articulating their relations differently, clash with each other. This leads into the last feature, the contingency of the symbolic order, contingency for the entire order, but for any given subsystem, and for any particular time's, place's, and culture's portion of the symbolic. Lacan notes "new things do emerge in the symbolic order" (*Seminar II* 61); it is not fixed once and for all, although its contingency does not therefore relativize it. To close this exegesis, the role of the Oedipus complex, which Lacan calls a key, but only one possible key, to the symbolic, provides a particularly revelatory example of this contingency. Modern Westerners cannot simply throw it aside, but:

When we study a mythology, for example, one that might perhaps appear with respect to a Sudanese population, we discover that for them the Oedipus complex is just a rather thin joke. It is a very tiny detail within an immense myth. The myth allows the cataloguing of a set of relations between subjects of a wealth and complexity besides which the Oedipus complex seems only to be so abridged a version that in the end it cannot always be used. (*Seminar I* 88)

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