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The Mirror Stage

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Greg Hynds gave us a well structured introduction to this popular work by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The essay on *The Mirror Stage* is concerned with the formation of our sense of self – the ego – brought about by an identification with an image of ourselves. The resulting sense of self involves an experience of wholeness, mastery, jubilation, narcissism (in the Greek myth Narcissus falls in love with his reflection) and misrecognition.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience in Ecrits: A Selection – 1948* translated by Alan Sheridan.

Greg is based in London and is a founding member of the Earl's Court Collective.

Our appreciation was summed up by one member who said she usually had difficulty in understanding Lacan and that Greg had made this aspect of Lacanian thought clearly understandable.

Lacan trained as a doctor in Paris. He specialised as a psychiatrist and by 1938 had presented *The Mirror Stage* paper to the International Psychoanalytical Association. This presentation was cut short by Ernest Jones and Lacan did not present his new version of the paper to the IPA until 1949.

In 1953, after a disagreement over the variable-length session, Lacan and many of his colleagues left the Société Parisienne de Psychanalyse to form a new group, the Société Française de Psychanalyse (SFP). One consequence of this was to deprive the new group of membership within the International Psychoanalytical Association.

The Mirror Stage is the most important of Lacan's papers and is meant to be seen alongside his other works of the time particularly *Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis* (1948) and *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (1953). These papers are also included in *Ecrits*. Lacan saw his work as a return to Freud and the ideas in Freud's *On Narcissism An Introduction* (1914) was important to *The Mirror Stage*.

Between the ages of six to eighteen months a child learns to recognise itself in a mirror. This is the formation of the *I*, in Freud's terms *das Ich*, and the function of the ego. However for Lacan there is a shift from considering the ego to seeing the ego as the seat of the misrepresentation (*meconnaissance*).

For Lacan there are three registers. These are *the real*, *the imaginary* and *the symbolic*. The Mirror Stage is mainly about the imaginary but these registers are always linked.

Before the mirror stage our reality is *The Real*. Our experience is raw and unprocessed. Freud called this the pre-narcissistic chaos of stimulation. In the beginning is a self that does not conceive of itself.

The Mirror Stage is a way of organising the self into inside and outside, an inner world and an outer world. The image in the mirror is a unified whole that allows the child some mastery over the real. It allows looking, admiring and copying the wholeness of others. We need the image of others wholeness.

This mirror stage is not just a stage of development; it is a lifelong structural feature of our selves. Our structure of relationships throughout life is a relationship between our image of our self and the image of the other.

The image is recognition of our self in a mirror. Our unity is not in our self but a unity in the image. We have a divided self split between our self and our image of our self. Here we treat the Ideal as our real self. But by comparison our real self is unfinished and insufficient, clumsy and uncoordinated.

Our ego is often treated as giving us a sense of self. By contrast for Lacan this only alienates us from our self. The Ego is a jumble of alienating images, of false identity, of fixations which prevent change. In analysis they can destroy the doctor's help by reducing the analyst to the level of a lover.

Because we misrecognise our self in the image the task of analysis is to separate out the subject from the image and the Other from the Symbolic. The Imaginary Father is a jumble of images of fathers while the symbolic father is the father in his place in the institutional order of the family.

The Symbolic is speech and language and our place in the social order. Therapeutic change happens in the symbolic order. In analysis the patient is trapped in an imaginary relation with the analyst. The analyst tries to clear these images out of the way. Often the imaginary relationship is to an analyst who has all the understanding, which is not realistically possible.

Thank you very much to Greg for helping us to greater clarity in this aspect of Lacanian Psychoanalysis.