Is Lacan's theory of the mirror stage still valid?
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My intention in this article is to evaluate Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in accordance with current philosophy of mind theories and findings from the field of psychology. My research is in the field of "philosophical psychology" and for that reason it does not contain experimental data obtained by me, but only reflections on experimental data from other researchers. First, I will expose what appears to be the essence of Lacan's mirror stage. Then, I will compare the most recent theses on this particular subject. This will be followed by a discussion on empirical evidence from the different theses. Finally, I will conclude by affirming that Lacan's thesis is not scientifically outdated, and that it can still be explored.

Lacan hasn't received much attention in the realm of analytic philosophy. According to Grant Gillet “perhaps the reason is that his ideas are presented in a way that is somewhat perplexing and impenetrable (...)”1. However, at least at this phase, Lacan is perfectly comparable to modern theories on the genesis of the self and the mirror stage. This does not necessarily mean that the theories are compatible. I believe that the current interest in the first person stages in Anglo-American philosophy may establish a connection to phenomenology and psychoanalysis.

The term "mirror stage" was coined by Henri Wallon2 to describe a development phase, despite the fact that several other authors, starting with Darwin, had already made observations regarding the phenomenon. Lacan3 began with Wallon but gave the concept a different meaning in several aspects. It is a paradigm for child development in infants between 6 and 18 months. For Lacan it signifies the birth of the ego/self correlated to the birth of the other. Interest in the mirror stage is still active but new paradigms in psychology, neuroscience and philosophy of the mind have questioned the validity of the theory on this subject from traditional authors (such as Mearleau-Ponty). Nevertheless, those authors do not refer directly to Lacan's theory, which seems to make it pertinent to evaluate here the theory of this influential psychoanalyst.

The mirror stage is not an experience that is purely optical, but as previously stated, a paradigm for child development and formation of the self. The mirror is not necessarily a mirror, but a specular image as in the example of another child that is seen as a whole. Lacan builds on the feeling of jubilation observed in a child when he or she recognizes that the image he or she sees in the mirror is his or her own4. Afterwards, the child also

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2 Henri Wallon (1931) Comment se développe chez l’enfant la notion de corps prope (in Journal de Psychologie November-December 1931, pp 705-48). There are English translations of the all French texts included in this paper.
4 “This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infants stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores it, in the universal, its functional as subject” Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” Alan Sheridan, tr. Ecrits, A Selection (1949).
looks at his or her mother so that she can confirm that that image belongs to him or her. Jubilation has an observable, behavioral side, but what occurs in the mind of the child? Lacan's interpretation is that the child recognizes him or herself through that exterior image. But why is there such jubilation? What the image represents for the child, according to Lacan, is the idealized image of him or herself and his or her body. He sustained that the child is born prematurely before his or her body becomes properly coordinated as a whole. In accordance with adult memories, the body is felt in a fragmented, shattered way. This prematurity experienced by human beings establishes a dependence on parents during a longer period than other mammal species, and it is at the origin of the human being's emotional specificity. One should also stress that that feeling of fragmentation does not exist for the child before recognition of the mirror image. The feeling of unity acknowledged in the image and that of internal fragmentation are simultaneous. The child anticipates his or her future unification in the image and that fills him or her with jubilation.

Wallon's conception was that acknowledgment of the mirror image is a projection of the proprioceptive system. In other words, there would be an evolution from within. For Lacan, on the contrary, the self is born exteroceptively. He likes citing Rimbaud's famous sentence "Je est un autre". The child begins by recognizing the image as an other but oddly perceives it as being an image of him or herself. It is through this other that the child arrives at a sense of self. The presence of the other will always be present at the origin of the consciousness of the self. The self is never a complete self. It only exists in function of the other.

Lacan will always conserve this aspect of the self in his theory, also known as the ego in psychoanalytic terms. The self that is formed in the mirror stage is not the truth, the last reality of the subject. It always encompasses this aspect of identifying with an image. It is somewhat fictitious, but it is a fiction that is useful and adaptive. However, it can still be an obstacle at times for the subject who searches for truth beyond identification with the significant others that he or she will meet throughout his or her life.

We can therefore take these conclusions, for the time being, on Lacan's theory on the formation of the self: the self does not exist at the beginning of life. The child lives in a state of unconsciousness until the age of 6 months. The self only begins to appear through an image that is exterior to the child. The self is formed through the other to which it will become irremediably connected.

How do current theories tackle some of these questions? A concept that has been truly developed today by several authors is that of the minimal self. What is the minimal degree of existence of a sense of self? Gallagher gives a fairly clear definition:

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“Phenomenologically, that is, in terms of how one experiences it, a consciousness of oneself as an immediate subject of experience, unextended in time. The minimal self almost certainly depends on brain processes and an ecologically embedded body, but one does not have to know or be aware of this to have an experience that still counts as a self-experience.”

Other authors have created similar concepts, although with differences that I do not wish to elaborate here: the episodic self (Galen Strawson), the core self (António Damásio) or the ecological self (Neisser). Gallagher also defines the opposite concept of narrative self: “A more or less coherent self (or self-image) that is constituted with a past and a future in the various stories that we and others tell about ourselves.”

There are also other concepts such as Damásio's autobiographic self which presents differences, but once again they do not seem important for what I want to express here.

Some proponents affirm that certain philosophical problems can be resolved by making this distinction between minimal and narrative self. Thus, the well-known problem of the non-self which reverts to David Hume can be solved if we make the above mentioned distinction. In this case these proponents affirm that denying the existence of the minimal self means denying the phenomenal consciousness itself, since the entire conscious state implies a sense of the minimal self. Zahavi, who is one of the most important proponents, sustains that this self may not be given reflexively, thus retaking the concept of Sartre's prereflexive self-consciousness.

For him and other authors, the phenomenal consciousness, the qualia, the character of what is it like always implies that there is a previous sense of a first person and the self. Nonetheless, it is disputable that this can be verified in the first months of life. It seems conceivable to me that there are pure feelings without a self, no matter how minimal it may be. They are theoretically separable. In my opinion, in order to be able to speak about the self, we have to think not only in terms of what is it likeness or sensations, but also from a point of view of the first person that is sufficiently different from others and the environment. For this point of view to be worthy of being designated as a self, it should also have a certain substantiality and a certain temporality, as minimal as they may be. Otherwise, what is the point of speaking about "self" even if it is a core self or a minimal self? In this sense, I believe that the mentioned authors add something to phenomenal consciousness with the concept of minimal self. In either case, these authors actually attribute the capacity of differentiation and some substantiality of the self to the first stages of consciousness.

Current researchers seem to agree that empirical data show that the self does not arise abruptly but that there is a progression from its minimal forms to the extensive or narrative forms. Rochat identifies 5 stages. Beginning with the rudiments of differentiation, he considers that an infant has an ecological self in the first 6 weeks of

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life (he uses Neisser's term in this article): "a feeling of the body as a differentiated, situated and agentive entity in the environment". Lacan did not know the term minimal self and for that reason could not have referred to it. However, the conception he has of the emerging self in the mirror phase is still that of a protoself which leads us to believe that for him the previous stages are purely unconscious and undifferentiated from environment. This kind of vision was not only his, but was actually the most common one among the authors from that period. William James famously defined the initial stages of life as, "The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion."

Lacan would have agreed with several current authors for whom consciousness and the self start with the body, but his position on this question is different. Gallagher & Meltzoff studied the question of the body scheme and body image and concluded that these two concepts are confused by the classic authors. Even the great author Mearleau-Ponty does not make a clear distinction on the subject, despite the fact that there is a certain awareness about it. According to these authors:

“We can characterize the body image as inclosing perceptions, mental representations, beliefs, and attitudes, where the intentional object of such perceptions, beliefs, etc (that which they are directed towards or that which they are about) is one’s own body. The body schema in contrast, involves certain motor capacities, abilities, and habits that enable movement and the maintenance of posture. It continues to operate, and in many cases operates best, when the intentional object of perception is something other than one’s own body.”

The body schema has more to do with the know-how while the body image is the consciousness of the body and the intentionality directed towards the body. According to Gallagher & Meltzoff, both the body schema and the body image are innate. They contest the idea that that is impossible due to the incomplete myelinization, which would not allow motor functions and perception to connect. On the contrary, as we shall see further ahead, they questioned the idea that those two systems are different and that it would be necessary to have a translation between them - a translation that the child's nervous system would not be able to achieve before 6 months of age. Everything would be different, however, if instead of a translation mechanism, we thought about a “supramodal perceptual mechanism”, that is, a way to process equivalent information for vision and body movements. In that case, nothing impedes the child from possessing mechanisms at birth that are capable of supporting either the body schema or the body image. The capacity to understand the other, as a different body but at the same time capable of having similar sensations is related to the body schema and the body image. If the child already possesses them at birth then it would be possible to sustain the idea that the child is already innately equipped to make a minimal differentiation from the other. What the child understands is mainly the action of the other that he can reproduce itself. If we admit the existence of a supramodal mechanism, there would be no difficulty in understanding the transformation of that perception of the other's action into its own action.

12 In *Principles of Psychology* (1890).
These ideas deviate from Lacan's perspective. As we have seen, he does not take into account that the child may possess an innate body image. On the contrary, its formation is based on the perception of the other. On the other hand, he sustains that it is that mental image that is going to organize the body schema, since it does not exist yet or if it exists it is still quite distorted. As we have seen, he refers to the stage prior to the mirror stage as that of body fragmentation. He therefore includes himself in those who think that there is a neurophysiological prematurity in the human baby. In all actuality, Lacan is completely opposed to the idea that the discovery of the other is based on proprioception, that is, that the body image (consciousness of the body) exists first and that it is through this image that one can know "other minds". This idea had served to go beyond what Husserl defended which was that knowledge of the other was obtained through inference\(^\text{15}\). The existence of a body image would allow us to go beyond that: there is no inference, there is an experience of the self through the experience of the other. This idea has been supported by findings in neuroscience concerning mirror neurons that would be innate. In this particular aspect, modern authors have extended Merleau-Ponty's ideas (not those of Lacan) in which the perception of the other is an exteriorization and serves as a model for the body schema to form itself from the model of the other. The child is fascinated with that other, which being an other is also him or herself. During this period, the child who attacks a peer affirms being attacked by him. It is from this period that the child competes with the other, the image of him or herself: "one of us must die". The beginning of the sense of self in Lacan starts with the recognition of the other. It is not present, therefore, from the moment of birth because it is shaped by the perception of the other and will never stop being determined by the presence of the other. There is no such thing as an isolated, pure self even if minimally. The self is always the self through the other.

Merleau-Ponty, within Sartre's philosophical thought, also states that the presence of the other's look on oneself causes apprehension\(^\text{16}\). That is why the mirror is not only a purely cognitive experience and the human being has felt a certain mystery in mirrors, accompanied by a certain dosage of anguish. The other invades my world and I start existing for him and not only for me. However, this concept is not as radical as Lacan's because it appears to conceive the existence of the self as logically and empirically independent from the other. The other disturbs me but the existence of a consciousness of myself is independent from its presence. It enters my world, but I exist first. On the contrary, Lacan considers that what comes in the first place is not the self, but the other through which the child gains consciousness of him or herself.

Thus, Lacan's theory of the self and the other does not keep with current predominant theories in several aspects. Can we then affirm that this is a question of fashion or the Zeitgeist? That is not how their proponents present the new conceptions of self. They sustain that it was the data from experiments and observations that led to their conclusions. However, not all psychologists believe that the data enables us to interpret that the sense of self is inscribed in the neurons. First and foremost, let us look at the evidence presented.


The study of the self that interests us here implies knowing the first person data. Parents along with other people treat children as if they were endowed with a sense of themselves and the other and that could be important for the creation of those exact feelings. However, what is the child's viewpoint of him or herself in the first person? To what extent is the child's self a projection of our own self? In other words, is it a projection, necessary for the child's development, which does not correspond to the child's own internal experience? Surely we can observe children's movements, their smiles and cries, etc., some of which seem to imitate those of adults. However, the so-called traditional psychologists did not consider this to be enough to attribute a self to children before the age of 6 months. In their opinions this is a series of exploratory reactions that will be reinforced by their parents and the environment. But, this does not imply any sense of self, not even the minimal self that we have been referring to.

Lacan's neurobiological evidence mainly comes from the psychology of form (Gestaltpsychologie) and neurophysiology. The latter would confirm his hypothesis on the human being's prematurity through the previously referred thesis of insufficient myelinization. This thesis is refuted by Gallagher & Meltzoff\(^\text{17}\) who believes that it does not prevent the existence of a minimal self in newborns.

As for the Psychology of Form (Gestaltpsychologie), Lacan retracts from it the theory that animals are genetically predisposed to recognize and be attracted to animals of the same species. It should be noted that Lacan believes that there is a discontinuity between human beings and animals\(^\text{18}\) however, he believes that the possession of certain forms is common to them. The unconscious image that permits recognition of an other of the same species is prior to self-recognition. It is the image that leads to the self and not the self that possesses images. The image allows us to anticipate unification in the other which is not yet possessed in the self.

Besides this evidence, Lacan still trusts the patients' verbal descriptions. He thus gives the patients' language the capacity to retrospectively reconstruct their trajectory. That is why he trusts the fragmented descriptions we referred to because they correspond to something experienced during the mirror phase (not before). This is valid from the therapeutic point of view because what matters are the representations of the subject. However, if we want to know the mental state of the newborn, these memories become debatable evidence because they can be imaginarily reconstructed. Lacan's evidence can reinforce his ideas but are not accepted today as being scientifically irrefutable. The data that has been obtained directly through the observation of newborns gives much more confidence to current researchers who seem to be on the right track. By relying upon Talia Welsh\(^\text{19}\), the strongest evidence that there is a self in the initial stages of life is that which is called "infant imitation". The imitation of another person's movements especially the non-visible movements of our body, presupposes a minimal recognition that the other is an other and that I am going to imitate him or her. In order to have such ability, the child needs to possess a previously defined body schema as well as a body image. If the self only begins to

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\(^{17}\) Op. cit.

\(^{18}\) See Lorenzo Chiesa, op. cit.

form its rudiments around 6 months, we can conclude that the child is incapable of imitating before that age. We could admit from a traditional psychological point of view that the newborn might have a body schema. However, possession of the mental image (according to the current definition) is not accepted in any shape or form by those psychologists. The child should be capable of translating visual stimuli into motion stimuli in order to imitate. This includes the parts of his or her body that are not visible. However, this seems impossible, as previously stated, given the insufficient myelination. Nevertheless, if we verify the hypotheses on transmodal mechanisms and the mirror neurons it would be theoretically explainable that there could be a true imitation and a subsequent sense of self and the other in the initial stages of human life.

It is, however, undisputed that we can observe that the child does movements that seem to copy that of adults. According to traditional psychologists these movements are not imitation but exploratory reactions to the environment, some of which are reinforced by adults. It is therefore about behavioral learning and does not presuppose any consciousness of the self or any intention of imitation that is comparable to that of the adult. That is, there is a certain agreement in relation to the facts that are observed but not to their interpretation.

Meltzoff\textsuperscript{20} contested these traditional opinions by carrying out several experiments in which, according to his interpretation, he proved that certain movements are imitated such as opening the mouth, rotating the head and sticking the tongue out. He not only sustains having proved that there is imitation in the direct presence of the model, but also that it can be deferred thus proving the participation of memory. With this M believes to have eliminated the possibility of it having to do with reflex. These are always specific (example: sticking the tongue out). If it is proven that imitation is a general mechanism then it would have been shown that it can not be a reflex.

Despite the fact that the authors are convinced that there are no shortcomings in their demonstrations, several other psychologists - whose theories are summarized in Tânia Welsh's article - sustain the opposite by affirming that there is no evidence that concludes that the self is innate. Several authors have presented research where we can verify that imitation only occurs in the case of tongue protrusion and not head rotation or the opening of the mouth. Furthermore, tongue protrusion occurs with the same frequency in other situations other than imitation of the adult. It has also been verified that this disappears as the child grows, leaving space for other exploratory behavior. All of this suggests that tongue protrusion is only a specific reflex that may eventually be reinforced by adults. It is not imitative behavior.

Maratos\textsuperscript{21} has questioned that imitation in newborns has to do with the imitation of older children. He sustains that imitation after pauses is very different in the two situations. Thus, we cannot say that there is continuity of the imitation phenomenon. We are dealing with two different things: we cannot conclude that real imitation derives

\textsuperscript{20} See the description of his experiences at Shaun Gallagher (2006) \textit{How the Body Shapes the Mind} Oxford University Press, USA, Chapter 3.

from reflex movements, just as we cannot conclude that writing derives spontaneously from hand reflexes.

Alternative explanations are suggested for what is called "imitation" in newborns. These explanations do not accept that a given behavior that is intelligent has to be the behavior of a self. We can designate the behavior of bees as being highly intelligent, but we are not willing to accept that they have a self. The proponents of those alternative explanations sustain that the behavior designated as imitative in infants are actually self-regulatory mechanisms that are socially reinforced and lead to a self-consciousness. Imitation is a type of behavior that is inscribed in an unconscious social biofeedback. First the child self-regulates what is assigned to him or her and only then can he or she begin to manifest a self-consciousness and a feeling of the other.

Can we then consider that what exists is not imitation in the full sense of what older children have but merely a form of proto-imitation? In other words, can we defend a weaker thesis which states that even though we are dealing with imitative behavior it is not yet completely imitative as in the case of older children? Talia Welsh argues that this is not the case and presents several studies that show that if the self were prior to social interaction then it would be expected that with some social rudiments the child would develop a well-organized sense of self, including time dimension (we are speaking about the narrative self). However, those studies show how tenuous and fragile the sense of self is, even at the age of 3. Before this age children do not have, for example, a strong sense that the events that he or she experienced in the past were actually lived by him or her. Although this is not conclusive proof, if it is true that the self has such a slow evolution this reinforces the idea that it does arise later and that the socio-cultural and linguistic factors should play a significant role.

I only intend to make philosophical psychology and that is why I will not get into the analysis of experiments, therefore trusting, just as Talia Welsh, that they were carried out successfully according to the standards of experimental psychology. These critical experiments on the innateness of the self, valorizing social, cultural and linguistic aspects in detriment of the clearly biological ones are more in tune with the Lacanian theory of self. As we have seen, for Lacan the period that precedes the mirror stage is lived in an unconscious state. Consciousness of the self is only acquired through the perception of the image of the other. The image that gives origin to the self remains unconscious even if it exists cognitively.

Lacan subsequently centered his theory on the symbolic dimension (language) in which the mirror stage would be included. By focusing only on this initial period (1932-1953), despite the importance given to the other, I believe that Lacan causally attributed the formation of self to biology. Effectively, the initial recognition of the other that the child will come to sense as being him or herself, as their unified future body, occurs because of the unconscious cognitive images that are inscribed in their nervous system. The human being is an animal with a disordered imagination but possesses forms in the sense that Gestalt psychology has defined them. These forms have led us to unconsciously search for contact with the other of the same species, with the mother's look being particularly important. She is the one who confirms the mirror image for the child. Thus, although the child is not born with self-consciousness, the possibility to develop one is inscribed in its biology. Therefore, self-consciousness is not purely
learned through an external reinforcement because it is in a certain sense already inscribed in biology. What can be said is that the presence of the other is always implicit\textsuperscript{22}.

Lacan does not attempt to explain the why for the formation of self-consciousness. Nor does he explain the existence of what we call today phenomenal consciousness. The explanation for "the why" of the existence of consciousness has become the biggest problem in contemporary philosophy of mind. I believe that Lacan would have considered it a problem that should be abandoned and that we should only explain "how" self-consciousness arises in ontogenesis.

In conclusion, I affirm that Lacan's theory on the genesis of the self and the mirror stage cannot be scientifically proved as false. It is true that the current trend is to consider the sense of self as arising interoceptively, as being inscribed in neurology. Much evidence has been gathered to demonstrate this theory. Nonetheless, there is a lot of evidence that seems to indicate that the conclusions on the existence of any sense of self at birth are precipitated and forced. Lacan's theory from this period seems to me to be entirely coherent and applicable in the analysis of the phenomenon of self-consciousness. Data from neuroscience would, in the meantime, be very useful in helping us decide on these questions and this science, along the lines of what Victor Lamme\textsuperscript{23} has done, in an attempt to define conscious mental states only with neurological data. In that case, we could know if children's neural states prior to the mirror stage are compatible or not with a minimal sense of self and the other.

\textsuperscript{22} This is not contradictory to the idea that Lacan did not believe that self-consciousness were innate.