

The “I” as an imaginary structure

Abstract: The “I” as an imaginary structure is an attempt to deconstruct the claims of knowledge over the “I”. It does so by showing that “I” is not a real structure, but an imaginary structure, based on the crucial confusion between image and reality, confusion through which the “I” takes its own image for reality. This confusion, established for the first time in the space of European philosophy by Plato in *The Allegory of the Cave*, will become a central concept in psychoanalysis, and a crucial concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis, where it will be known as the narcissistic identification of the “I” with an image, through which the “I” become the “Other” from its very origin. The “I” is formed, according to “the mirror stage”, through identification with one’s own reflected image, this identification representing the cause of the alienation or the “incarceration” of the subject in the realm of the imaginary, respectively in the shell of a foreign and illusory identity. Thus, the “prisoner I” from Plato’s cave, who cannot know “reality”, can only let himself be “enchanted” by the “shadow” or image world. This “prisoner I” becomes, in Lacan’s conception, the narcissistic “I”, whose imaginary and illusory structure, by analogy, hides the reality, realizing the fact that the “I” is not compatible with a subject of knowledge from within the “conscious-perception” system.

Keywords: “I”, “Other”, image, reality, identity, identification, “mirror stage”, narcissism, imaginary structure

1. The “disenchantment” of the “I” – a reinterpretation of Plato’s allegory of the cave

The first major disenchantment related to knowledge was conceived by Plato in the *Allegory of the Cave* (Plato 1986, 313-320). He demonstrated it by showing that man suffers from a fundamental vice or ignorance – that of not knowing “the real world”, of allowing his attention to be caught and captivated by “the shadow world”, by the realm of the imaginary and the illusive. This is the realm in which *the images of objects are taken for reality*, just as the prisoners, with their arms and legs and necks tied so they could only look forward, mistake the shadows/images projected by the fire in the cave for reality.

Plato is referring here to a *crucial confusion*, that between *image and reality*, respectively illusion and reality. It is in this confusion that “enchantment”

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resides. "Disenchantment", as an exit from illusion and entry into reality, would therefore consist of "untangling" this confusion. To be more exact, it would consist in "untying" the prisoner's eye, so that he could not only look forward towards the screen of the cave, but to be able to turn his glance at the back of the cave, towards the cause, the light source. This source of the projection of the shadows or images in the cave would be the Fire. *The first turn of the glance* would therefore be the turn towards *the fire behind the images*, behind the sensorial reality. This fire could be seen as an analogy for the mind or the intellect, as an intermediary level between sensorial and intelligible. This fire, or artificial light of the mind, which produces the images, does not represent the true light of knowledge, but merely the light of phenomenal knowledge, i.e. that "speleological truth" (truth of the cave), given by *science*.

For science to be complete, however, it needs to become *con-science*, reason for which *a second turn of the glance* is necessary, this time towards the *Sun behind the fire*, behind the phenomenal world, behind science. This second turn of the glance, from the fire to the Sun, equivalent to exiting the cave, is related to that double, bifocal glance of the conscience, able to make *a complete glance rotation*, of 360 degrees, marking in this way the transfer from the "speleological truth" to the "heliological truth"¹ (Heidegger 1988, 164), given by contemplating reality in itself from outside the cave.

The "disenchantment" would therefore mean for Plato this double turn of the glance, as a full 360 degree rotation of the conscience. This turn allows man to be free, to come out from the shadow world, from the unconscious world, from the cave world, from the world of the conditioned. Conscience is, therefore, what Plato is after, for it is the one which lifts the veils off the unconscious and blind eyes of the "I", of the "prisoner". Because if *the glance which only projects forward*, or with only one pair of eyes, correspondent to the sensorial or appearance level of reality, is *specific to the "I"* or the "prisoner" in the cave, then *turning the glance towards the light source*, towards within, correspondent to the intelligible level of reality, is *specific to the turn of the conscience*, the only one which can "disenchant" or "untie" the reality from the shadow, thus freeing and curing man from confusions and illusions.

As opposed to the light of the Sun, which is not man made, the light of the "artificial" fire from the cave is produced by the human mind. This is the reason why man *is bond in duty to at least come to know the fire in the cave*, by turning his glance towards this fire which is our mind, i.e. the source of light for all images or shadows. Through this concept, Plato refers to something essential, specifically which before knowing reality it is important to see *who* the one behind the reality is, *who* the one that knows the reality is. Thus, the "disenchantment" primarily targets knowledge of self, for which it is mandatory to start with the "disenchantment" of our "I"; that is to say with "untying" the prisoner so that he can turn his glance to what resides behind

the “sensorial” eye, behind the this eye which is captivated and “enchanted” by its own images which it confuses for reality.

In other words, the “disenchantment” is related primarily to the field of the knowledge of man, the field of self-knowledge, knowledge of the subject, or what is generically referred to as our “I”. It is in relation to this very “I” that a great ignorance persists. The prisoners in Plato’s cave, “enchanted” by the reflected images of things, would confuse those with reality. In much the same way, *we* take our turn to become enchanted, captivated and hypnotized by the reflected images of our “I”, by placing ourselves in the realm of illusion. “What follows is our confusion of the «I» with our own reality, which establishes one of the greatest illusion of all, the illusion that the «I» could have its own identity, that «I» could be identical with «I», that «I» could be identical with me” (Ardelean 2016, 138). That is the reason why the “disenchantment” of the “I” consists in seeing that in reality the “I” is not a structure of identity, but more a *structure of identification* with something, with something else, respectively with *an image of reality*. Plato’s greatest merit is that he could highlight this crucial confusion between image and reality, through which the “I” tends to replace reality with an image of said reality, which ends up becoming more important than (reality) itself.

It follows in logical fashion that the “I”, in platonian terms, is but a mere “copy”, a “shadow” or an “image” of reality, respectively a confusion between image and reality. Through this confusion the “I” can pass for reality when it is in fact no more than an image. The “disenchantment” of the “I” would consist therefore, in Plato’s terms, in the “disenchantment” or the “untying” of this confusion through which the “I” is considered reality, when actually it is no more than *identification with an image*. This identification thus turns the “I”, not into a real structure, but, as Lacan expressed it, an imaginary structure.

2. The “I” as a structure of an “I = Other” type alterity

The confusion between image and reality, first established within the field of European philosophy² by Plato, will ultimately become, within the frame of psychoanalysis, a central concept, known under the name of *identification*. Psychoanalysis will show, with its specific instruments, that the *structure of the “I” is not a structure of the “I” = “I” type, but a structure of unconscious identification with something, someone else, respectively with an image. In this way, the “I” becomes a structure of alterity by excellence, adopting the structure “I = Other”*. It must be said that the structure of identification researched within psychoanalysis is not the classic, intersubjective one (between two people), but rather *the intrapsychologic identification, respectively the unconscious identification within the space of*

one individual’s mind. This identification will further make up the pattern on which inter-subject or secondary identifications to follow will be recorded.

Through this process, psychoanalysis also becomes an attempt of “disenchantment”. It takes the shape of a lift which initially leads us down within the basements and under-lairs of the “cave”, or of our unconscious mind. It takes us there in an attempt to determine us to catch a conscious glimpse, which is with our glance turned towards the back of the cave, or turned inward in ourselves, of the unconscious mental mechanism of projection. This very mechanism is the one which projects images on the walls of the “cave” within our mind, making us “prisoners”. As such we are doomed to see these images with by glancing forward and take them for reality. Becoming conscious of this process is the only way to naturally determine the elevator to go up, to lift us up and out of the cave, i.e. out of the limited and conditioned space of the mind of our “I”.

The next paragraphs will look at the psychoanalytical arguments on this intrapsychologic identification process, through which the “I” becomes the “Other”. These arguments were developed by two important representatives of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan³.

***Freud’s argument of identification:
A (the “I”) becomes B (the object, the “Other”)***

From an *intersubjective*, psychosociological point of view, identification is the psychological process through which a subject assimilates an aspect, a characteristic or an attribute of another. Thus it totally or partially transforms based on this assimilation (Laplanche and Pontalis 1994, 181).

From an *intrapsychic*, i.e. psychoanalytical point of view, identification is understood by Freud in the completely opposite way. This means identification takes place within *the psychological space of a single individual*. “The Freudian modification of the regular identification scheme, therefore takes place in an essential point: space” (Nasio 1999, 110). It follows that the exterior space of intersubjective relations is substituted for the interior space of intrapsychic relations. Through this process, Freud transplants the psychological, tridimensional space in the space of the unconscious. In Freud’s conception, the psychological or interior space of the “I” is the space of the unconscious. The “I” is an unconscious formation which identifies (unconsciously as well) with an “object” from that space. That object, in turn, is not the exterior person of the other, consciously perceived, but an “unconscious representation, precursory of the existence of the other, onto which the exterior reality of the other person will then come to fit on” (Nasio 1999, 113). In other words, the “object” would be the unconscious and impersonal, already existing representation, onto which

the exterior other will graft or adjust. Hence, identification in Freud's conception becomes "the unconscious process carried out by the «I» when it transforms into an aspect of the object" (Nasio 1999, 111). It must be mentioned that within this identification process the active role, according to Freud, is played by the "I", in the sense that A (the "I") identifies with or becomes B (the object). Furthermore, the identification agent, or the one who identifies itself is the "I".

***Lacan's argument of the reversed identification:
B (the object, the "Other") produces A (the "I")***

This particular specification is all the more important, since there is also the reversed perspective of Freudian identification. This reversal was sequenced by the famous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was considered the most loyal, but also the most nonconformist Freudian interpreter. Hereby, the stake of the Freudian concept of identification consists in explaining the intricacy report between two unconscious instances, the "I" and the object. All the while, the Lacanian stake of the identification concept consists in "naming a relation in which one of the terms creates the other" (Nasio 1999, 112), where the scheme of identification is that of the causality of one of these terms as produced by the other. Lacan, by taking on from Freud only the notion that identification is unconscious, operates a *reversal of the sense of the identification process*, it being in this way *inverted*. Therefore, instead of A becoming B – as it was Freud's contention – *B is the one who produces or causes A*, the active role played before by the "I" now being insured by the object. Identification thus means, in Lacan's concept, that the object with which the "I" identifies, becomes the cause of the "I", the identification agent being the object, not the "I".

According to this down-throw of perspective, the "I" forms, as Lacan would put it, through identification with its own reflected image, which produces it. This means that the "I" does not see itself directly, but only indirectly, through means of the reflected image. When the subject sees its image reflected in the mirror or in the "Other", it becomes alien, it strays from itself, because it blends in and *identifies with that image, which is the "Other" and which represents the constitutive moment of self-alterity, as genesis of the "I"*. Who couldn't relate to *the myth of Narcissus*, the one who falls in love with his own image? It is, therefore, enough to see one's self once to become "enchanted", captivated and blinded by one's own mirrored image, by one's own shadow or by this shell of a foreign identity, as an expression of a false and illusory identity. This reverted identification, through which the "Other" produces the "I", can be better grasped by reference to the famous *mirror stage*⁴ – Lacan's most important psychoanalytical contribution.

3. “The mirror stage” as basis for the imaginary structure of the “I”

Considered the reference point of the entire Lacanian work, the mirror stage (*stade du miroir*) was first presented within the Marienbad Congress of 1936. This conception became famous later, with the occasion of the 16th International Psychoanalysis Congress in Zürich, on July 17th 1949. It was titled *Le stade de miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je, telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique*⁵. The mirror stage represents as solid, as scientific and as lucid an argument as one could find in the attempt to reach the “disenchantment” of the “I”, which is to say of destructuring and deconstructing its illusion, imaginary and illusory structure. This deconstruction accounts for the fact that the “I” does not have an autonomous, independent reality, but is in fact, in origin, the “Other”.

The concept of “mirror stage” was initially conceived between 1936 and 1949, as a stage of development of the child between six and eighteen month. The stress here falls on its *historical* component, and marks that decisive moment in a child’s development, in which the prototype of the libidinal relation with the body image is formed (Lacan 2002, 76). The six month old child, Lacan says, differs from the chimpanzee of the same age through the fact that, the first is fascinated with his reflection in the mirror and attributes it to him with glee, while the chimpanzee realizes that the image is illusory, and quickly loses interest in it (Lacan 2002, 75). Beginning with 1950, the stress will fall less on the historical component and more on the *structural* component, meaning on that component of human subjectivity named by Lacan “the paradigm of imaginary order”⁶, in which the subject is permanently caught and captivated by its own image (Evans 2005, 273).

The mirror stage refers thusly to the *myth of Narcissus*, in its deepest sense. That sense of helplessness, of vital insufficiency of the child, of prematurity, which constitutes the cause of the *imaginary alienation in the mirror*. Given that the child’s visual system is more advanced than the motor one, this allows the child to see his image in the mirror as a whole, as *gestalt*, before reaching control of body movements. From here follows a contrast between the incoordination of the body, experienced as a fragmentary body, and its own image, seen as a whole. This contrast then creates a rivalry and aggressive tension between subject and image; tension which is solved by identifying the subject with the image (Lacan, 2002, 76). This discrepancy between the specular image, which reflects the body as a unit, as integrity and coordination, and the reality of the body, in which there is no unity, integrity and coordination of movements, will be felt dramatically and aggressively. It is this disagreement which lies at the *basis of the first form of discrepancy between image and reality*. In other words, the asymmetry between the imaginary, as a unitary image of the body, and reality, as fragmentation,

incoordination of body movements, will generate for the first time the conflict between *imaginary*, between *what should be* (the ideal “I”) and *reality*, *what is*. The “I” is, hence, the result of this discrepancy, this asymmetry, this contradiction and conflict, and it is so diminished through the identification with the reflected image, which means with the fellow creature, the “Other”, as origin of the “I”. “This primary identification with the fellow creature is the one which forms the «I»” (Evans 2005, 274).

The constitution of the “I” takes place, therefore, through the process of identification with one’s own reflected image (*image spéculaire*), moment described by Lacan as being one of gleefulness. “The child’s joy is owed to his imaginary triumph in anticipating a degree of muscular coordination which he has not yet reached in reality” (Lacan, 1987, 79). Hence, the imaginary, as realm of the image, has from the very beginning the characteristic of appearance, illusion and “enchantment” of the “I”, due to the hypnotic effect of the reflected image. The formation of the “I” through identification with the fellow creature or the reflected image makes identification the key factor of the mirror stage and imaginary order. By highlighting the decisive role of the image in identification, Lacan defines identification as “the transformation which takes place within the subject when he attributes an image to himself”. This “attribution” means recognizing and appropriating that image as being its own. Of course, this appropriation of the reflected image in *the primary mirror* needs the confirmation of another mirror, a *secondary mirror*, which is the sight of the “Other”. The child in front of the mirror turns to the adult holding him, his request being a confirmation of narcissistic nature: “Is this me?” or “Can I appropriate this image?”. It is only after the narcissistic confirmation, passed through the mirror/the sight of the adult who says: “Yes, this is you!”, that the child appropriates the image. Thus, the image in the primary mirror passes through the reflection of the secondary mirror or sight of the “Other”, who confirms the appropriation of the image. This shows once again the active part played by the “Other” in the formation of the “I”, either by this “Other” being the image reflected in the mirror, or it being the image of the “Other”. The identification with the reflected image becomes the narcissistic image of the ideal “I”, or the ideal image of the “I”, which can never be reached, because it is placed outside the “I”, in its exterior. This discrepancy will generate the aggressiveness towards and continuous rivalry against one’s self, in the attempt to maintain the statutory identification from the mirror stage.

If for Jung, Melanie Klein and other psychoanalysts, the image (*the imago*) has both positive and negative effects, for Lacan the image is mainly negative because of the hypnotizing and captivating effect of the reflected image. This reflected image, perceived as a whole, as *gestalt*, as a unit, in contrast with the fragmented body, is considered by Lacan a simple illusion

of integrity, having as main effect the alienation of the subject in its image. Furthermore, this alienation constitutes the basis of the subject's aggressiveness towards and rivalry with his own self. Thus, *the constitution of the "I" through identification with an image from outside of itself, brings to life a structure of rivalry of the subject with itself*, which supposes, then, aggressiveness and alienation.

The "I" is formed through identification with the fellow creature or the reflected image, named by Lacan "primordial identification with an ideal image of one's self" (Lacan 2002, 79). Through this identification the "I" and the fellow creature, or the reflected image, form the prototypal dual relation, that is fundamentally narcissistic. The child identifies with the ideal image of himself and fixes himself in it as into a frame or "stature", by saying: "the image is me", even if this image is situated outside of him, in his exterior. This is what Lacan calls the primordial identification with the ideal image of the "I"; image which unable to be ever reached, will trigger aggressiveness and rivalry against one's self, which is narcissism.

The term narcissism (*narcissisme*) is first coined in Freud's work, in 1910. Freud connects the birth of the "I" to the narcissistic stage of development. Lacan further develops Freud's concept, but relates it more to its homonym, Narcissus, and defines it as "the erotic attraction towards the reflected image" (Evans 2005, 198). Narcissism is an *ambivalent* formation, which has double character, *erotic* and *aggressive* alike. This ambivalence forms its "front" and "reverse". The erotic characteristic, as it appears in the myth of Narcissus, is given by the attraction or the falling in love, of the subject to/with the image or the *gestalt*. The aggressive characteristic is given by the contrast, the tension or the conflict between the integrity of the reflected image and the lack of motor unity of the subject's real body. Aggressiveness thus constitutes narcissism, in the sense of that particular rivalry against one's self. It is the subject's attempt to maintain the identification formed in the mirror stage, when the child sees his reflected image in the mirror as *gestalt* or unity, in contrast with the lack of coordination of the real body, contrast felt as an aggressive tension between the unitary reflected image and the fragmentary real body (Evans 2005, 41). Hence, this narcissistic identification with the reflected image, or the fellow creature, implies the ambivalence of the erotic and aggressive elements, "erotic aggressiveness" being considered by Lacan the fundamental ambivalence of narcissism, which all the other forms of identification will later fix onto. Given this ambivalence, narcissism can easily glide from the extreme pole of self-love to the opposite pole of self-destruction ("narcissistic suicidal aggressiveness"), as it is found in the myth of Narcissus.

The narcissistic identification with the reflected image represents at the same time, in Lacan's conception, the fundamental cause of the subject's alienation within a shell of foreign, false and illusory identity through which the "I" becomes the "Other" from its very origin. In this sense, the "I"

does not represent more than merely a sum of successive identifications, which is an “Other” for himself, because the subject will find himself primarily in the “Other”, be it his own image in the mirror, or his image in the “Other”. It is this very characteristic, of imaginary, appearance and illusion, which the “I” takes into a radical exteriority in rapport with the subject, that made Lacan state that the “I” is reduced to narcissism, respectively to that “imaginary capture” which characterises narcissism, by negating the “I”’s capacity to be “subject of knowledge within the frame of conscious-perception” (Nasio 1999, 66).

The mirror stage shows, therefore, that *the “I” is the result of a misunderstanding (méconnaissance), because it introduces the subject into the imaginary order* (Evans 2005, 247). The imaginary order, opposed to the symbolical and real order from the three-part scheme of Lacanian thought, has a captivating power over the subject, due to the “hypnotic” effect of the reflected image which “incarcerates the subject into a series of static fixations” (Evans 2005, 148). Furthermore, the imaginary represents for Lacan the dimension through which man gets the closest to animal psychology. It may very well be for this reason that Lacan, much like Plato and Descartes, has a complete distrust towards imagination as an instrument of knowledge, and places the stress, just like the two before him, on the supremacy of *the pure intellect, which does not depend on images*, considered the only way to reach a proper knowledge. Through this distrust in imagination, Lacan could be positioned within the framework of rationalism, rather than empiricism.

Operating solely in the register of the imaginary, which is that of images or “luminous shadows”, the “I” cannot have and cannot receive any *real ontological foundation*. In this sense, Lacan denounces the imaginary characteristic, that of apparition, appearance and illusion, which the “I” takes in a radical exteriority in rapport with the subject. Through the mirror stage the “I” identifies with the “Other” or with the reflected image, in the sense of the upside down image, according to which B (the object) produces or causes A (the “I”). The mirror stage, thus, represents the basis of the imaginary order. The imaginary is seen by Lacan as a realm of the image, imagination, delusion, cheating and illusion. The main illusions of the imaginary are those related to “integrity, synthesis, autonomy, duality and above all, similarity” (Evans 2005, 147).

The mirror stage, as basis for the imaginary order, represents not only the most important Lacanian contribution, but equally the most important psychoanalytical contribution within the framework of the “disenchantment” of the “I”. By proving the “I” to be no more than an image or an imaginary structure, Lacan deconstructs the claims of knowing the “I” and reveals in this way something of extreme significance, which is that the “I” *is not compatible to knowledge within the “conscious-perception”*

framework. Lacan highlights the appearance, illusion and radical exteriority characteristic of the "I" which is caught, captivated or "incarcerated" in an image, in a "stature", whose apparent foundation takes the form "I see, therefore I am". He confirms in this way, with scientific and clinical arguments, that the "I" cannot receive a real ontological foundation, but only an apparent, illusory or imaginary one.

Notes

¹ Martin Heidegger speaks about "the speleological truth", the one which provides the norm in the cave, and "the heliological truth", the one which provides the norm in the solar world.

² This issue, the Gordian knot of all issues, was actually intuited and approached, in various ways, by all major world philosophies and religions, in permanent attempts to reach reality and become free from the "spell" of image or illusion.

³ Jacques Lacan is considered the most loyal, but also the most nonconformist interpreter of Freud's work. A man of great culture, Lacan widened the horizons of psychoanalysis, by introducing concept from the spheres of philosophy, linguistics and mathematics.

⁴ The concept of the mirror and the action of mirroring are found in various schools and orientations, from the cognitivist ones to the psychoanalytical ones. In psychoanalysis there was a first mention of mirroring in Winnicott's theory, referring to the way in which the mother reflects the moods of the child. The term of mirror stage, was initially formulated by the psychologist Henry Wallon, as a stage between six to eight months in which the child perceives its "I" in space. Donald Winnicott, Henri Wallon, Paul Schilder, René Zazzo, Françoise Dolto, Jacques Lacan are among the most important psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who highlighted in their research the role of specular reflection in the configuration of the "I".

⁵ The Mirror Stage as Formative of the "I" function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.

⁶ The psychological life has, according to Lacan, three dimensions: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The imaginary order is related to the images of the "I" in the mirror stage. The symbolical order, specific to humans, is related to the function of speech/language, to the law which governs the unconscious – the unconscious being seen as a structured language. The real order is more difficult to name, because it goes beyond the imaginary order, and the symbolic order, it being similar to the Kantian object itself.

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