

The place of the imaginary ego in the treatment

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Lacan burst upon the scene with his critique of contemporary views about the place of the ego in psychoanalysis. The critique was one of the major planks of his return to Freud: a withering broadside attack on the autonomous ego, the healthy part of the ego, reinforcing the ego, adaptation to reality and the place of the ego in it. For us this battle that has been fought and won and we see little need to return to the issue some 60 years after Lacan locked horns with the psychoanalytic establishment of the day.

It might be time instead to engage in some reflections on the ego. And I have a contention. My contention is that there are two quite separate, independent lines of thought running through Lacan's considerations about the ego and I don't see that he ever really demonstrated how the two were especially connected. Maybe the connection can be explained in some plausible way. It is just that I don't get what the connection is. In the first part of my paper I explain why I don't get it. And if I have come all this way it is not so that I can [. . .] but so that you can help me get it. Then, in a second part of the paper I talk about the place of the ego in the progress of the treatment.

The conception of the ego as an autonomous agency is replaced in Lacan's conception of the ego by two lines of thought that are, as I say, independent of one another.

The first is what I call the "ego-subject" and I relate it to the ego as subject of knowledge (or misknowledge) and as agent (an illusory or false agent) of our actions. In this first sense it contrasts with and stands over against the Lacanian subject. This is a frankly philosophical concept.

The second is more specifically concerned with the formation of the ego, with its origins in the mirror stage and the consequences of these origins. This line of thought directly addresses the ego's place in treatment and is clinically significant. I will call this ego the "ego-object".

Some words on each in turn.

The ego-subject

Early discussions of the ego in Lacan's work – I'm thinking of Seminars 1 and 2 especially – centre on two theses: 1/ the ego's role as a focus of knowledge and misknowledge/miscognition, or, in French, *connaissance*, and *méconnaissance*. The *savoir/connaissance* opposition is crucial and all so-called ego knowledge invariably has something illusory about it. 2/ The ego's relationship to agency and the emphasis upon the "decentring" of the subject. This claim about agency is that the mainspring of our actions is located in the unconscious and so any notion of ourselves as free and autonomous agents is thereby an illusion.

Both these theses are highly philosophical in nature, which explains not only Lacan's interest in philosophers influential in his time and milieu – Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, as well as Kojève and Hyppolite, also Merleau-Ponty – but also the interest subsequently shown in Lacan's work by philosophers themselves. Both theses (the *méconnaissance* thesis and the agency thesis) are also

concerned with the ego considered as a “subject”, as distinct from “object”: as subject of knowledge, even if it is misknowledge, and as subject of action, even if it is a mistake to think of the ego as the real subject of action. These are philosophical matters and Lacan’s critical and sceptical views about ego knowledge and agency have shown themselves to be of special interest to philosophers.

Now, what I don’t get is the connection between the philosophical views and the mirror-stage. While these theses about the ego as subject of knowledge and action are obviously relevant to the question of the ego’s autonomy, or lack thereof, it is not so clear how this discussion relates to the fact that the ego has been formed by and during the mirror stage. The mirror stage emphasises that the ego is an object at grips with its semblable, look-alike, counterpart, or small other, locked in an erotic and rivalrous relationship. I don’t see how this addresses the (more philosophical) question of the ego as supposed subject, nor do I think Lacan manages to show how they are connected.

The ego-object

I will say just a few words about the mirror stage in relation to this “ego-object”. I’ll be brief both because the theory is pretty well known and in the main well understood anyway, and because I want to focus on the ego-object in other respects.

1 The first and fundamental identification is the ego’s mirror-stage identification with its counterpart, semblable, look-alike. It is the dual or dyadic relationship in which the identification with the other (small other) takes place in the form of a double attitude towards the small other: erotic, narcissistic attachment, the “you and me, and the aggressive rivalry, the “you or me”.

2 While at one point Lacan refers to the “contrary-to-nature” features of the imaginary couple (461), these attitudes are both *natural* in the sense of inherent to the nascent ego. So while there is a clear filiation with the Hegelian struggle to the death of the master-slave dialectic familiar from Kojève, the aggressive rivalry is not motivated by a struggle to the death of two consciousnesses. Rather, it is a natural – I emphasise “natural” – response of the human being to the image of its counterpart, its semblable, its look-alike. It is ethology rather than philosophy that is at play here. Likewise, the narcissistic enamoration with one’s own image in the imaginary counterpart is also a natural function of the ego.

3 The ego’s identification with the specular image serves to unify the imaginary elements of the fragmented body. It makes them into a unity. This unity then becomes the basis of a narcissistic investment in the self that marks the transition from the autoerotic to the narcissistic moment. Thus the theory of the mirror stage and the formation of the ego fills a theoretical gap in Freud’s work on narcissism by providing an explanation of what in his paper on narcissism Freud describes as a “new psychical action”, without further explanation, that marks the movement from autoerotism to narcissism:

a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed. The auto-erotic instincts, however, are there from the very first; so there must be something added to auto-erotism - a new psychical action - in order to bring about narcissism.

Thus, the previously fragmented and individually invested regions of the body come under a unified image of the body which is libidinally invested, and Freud calls this narcissism.

This ego, the product of identifications, can be cathected, libidinally invested in, just like any other object can. That is, in the field of our experience the ego is an object like any other. I will ask whether the ego really is just like any other object in a moment, but for the moment we can follow Freud's insight that the libido can be invested in. Moreover, we can also agree with Freud when he says that the ego is a bodily ego, we represent the ego to ourselves in the form of our body, a body that is signified and libidinally invested.

What sort of object is it?

If the ego can be taken as an object, what sort of an object is it? It is unlike any of the objects that Freud introduced and Karl Abraham developed. In Freud's account (even more so in Abraham's) each object (anal, etc.) is associated with a phase and a specific attitude towards the object of that phase. The oral phase is marked by the desire to incorporate the object, the anal phase by the ambivalent relationship of love and rage towards the object, and so on. In each of these phases the ego is in the subject position. The ego loves, hates, devours its object. And when the ego becomes an object? It adopts these attitudes towards itself as a reflection of its attitudes towards its own objects. The ego is liable, then, to love itself, to devour itself, to hate itself through the identifications it makes with the objects it has identified with.

Even if we say that the ego is narcissistic, we should remember that narcissism has a morbid dimension, making the term "narcissism" particularly well chosen, given the morbid dimension of the mythical figure of Narcissus, spellbound till death by the reflection he does not realise is his own. Narcissus has always been associated with melancholia, or at least with sloth, *acedia*, involving as it does withdrawal of investment in the things of the world.

As I say, the ego is apt to be not just an object of self-love but is also susceptible to measures of self-loathing and abhorrence. We are accustomed to explain this wide variation in the ego's view of itself in terms of a split between the ego and the ego ideal, which we regard as a symbolically mediated standpoint outside the ego from which it is assessed and judged as loveable or not. The paradox is that it is the melancholic who sees the truth about the ego most clearly; as Freud wrote, the melancholic regards himself as "petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence, one whose sole aim has been to hide the weaknesses of his own nature". He drily observes that in this he has a keener eye for the truth than most people and wonders why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind.¹ It clearly makes for less misery to be judged loveable than not, even if self-love, like any love, has a seductive and illusory character. And the converse to this also applies: liberal doses of narcissism are recommended for not sinking into the pit of self-loathing.

In melancholia the identification with an object as refuse, with the degraded or abject object, is capable of producing self-loathing in the ego with the melancholic consequences that follow. The melancholic knows better than anyone the hazards involved in the fall of the semblants that bind the ego to its own private sources of pleasure.

¹ SE 14: 246

It is interesting, in the context of these remarks, to reflect on the fact that the process of an analysis involves mourning and object loss which can be painful, difficult and even traumatic. There is always loss in analysis when the semblants to which one is bound fall, and trauma when the abject reality of what lies beyond the veil is exposed, when the object as cause of desire is unveiled. The ethics of psychoanalysis offers very little by way of comfort or succour. The analysis itself is unable to shelter the analysand from the difficulties encountered along the path of the analytic experience itself. And the alleviation of suffering neither is nor should be the aim of analysis, which is not about achieving happiness or even wellbeing, even if these end up being secondary benefits, “collateral damage” we might say, of this process that has another aim.

Analysis is of course not always painful and difficult, but it sometimes is, and the part of the process that is painful and difficult is produced by the vacillation, or the falling, of semblants – semblants that include not just what fantasmatically attaches a subject to his or her object as a source of jouissance but also what attaches him or her to his or her ideals, and this includes ethical ideals.

Lacan describes analysis, built as it is on the process of free association, as a structured process whose outcome is the production of a sequence of S_1 s, or master signifiers, that have determined crucial behaviours of the subject over their life. “You are this!” “You are that!” A girl lives out the imperatives of her father. . . . The production of these signifiers has the capacity to release the subject from being determined by them. This is no merely cognitive or intellectual exercise but is one that is effectively lived through – repeated – by the analysand in the transference relation with the analyst. It is impossible for this exercise to take place in the absence of the transference; which is its *sine qua non*.

The process is a slow one of ‘disidentification’, but this doesn’t mean that the subject ends up without identifications. The ego is a repository of identifications, and there is no subject without an ego. On the contrary, the subject’s identification with the universal dimension of S_1 is the necessary condition for analysis to be possible in the first place, since it is the manner in which the subject is caught up in the unconscious. At the end of the day – in the final analysis, as we say – the subject is not completely or absolutely separated from his master-signifiers. The subject has been through the experience of his lack in being, *manque-à-être*, his division as a subject. The aim of an analysis can therefore be considered to be to call identifications into question. It is important that the analyst not acquiesce in the analysand’s identifications, in order that these semblants with which the subject identifies can be brought to “vacillate”, as Lacan says, when these semblants start to wobble – like those little widget icons for your apps on your iPad which wobble when you keep your finger pressed down on them – and you get what Lacan calls the “Socratic effect” – already contained in the practice of free association itself.

The semblants of sex are particularly susceptible to being questioned by analysis. The reason of course is that not only sexual identity but also the sexual encounter itself are sustained by semblants. Semblants take the place of a sexual relationship. Analysis makes very apparent the extent to which male desire is sustained by phallicised semblants. As the analysis progresses and a man traverses his individual fantasy, his fantasy is reduced thereby to its bare elements. When this occurs the phallic function may become even more insistent, along with its underlying castration. As Freud saw; he spoke of the rock of castration as an obstacle that a man encounters towards the end of his analysis. This castrating effect of analysis is also indicated by how common it is for men to

engage in a regular practice of masturbation in close synchronicity with their sessions—as if seeking to derive, post session, reassurance over his own potency. For a woman, on the other hand, as the pathways of her desire unfold, she is inclined to encounter the inexistence of the Other and the futility of sacrifice. A woman's scorn or cynicism can remind a man that his sublimations count for nothing in comparison with jouissance and that his attachment to his semblants is misplaced, since it cannot be compared to the real of jouissance. Women are closer to the real and also have a keener awareness of the fact that the phallus is a semblant. A woman's desire naturally leads her to the barred A, whereas for the man the ϕ function is an obstacle to the reduction of the phallus to the status of a mere semblant.

We should also note that what makes semblants vacillate is the emergence of the S_1s themselves that are produced by the analytic discourse as such.

We should further recognise that “wobbly semblants” can be the reason for someone's starting an analysis in the first place, and so this is not just what happens at the end. Being abandoned by a lover, the loss of a job, outbursts of anger or violence towards those one loves, a personal crisis of some kind can produce a narcissistic trauma – I am worthless, not lovable, my life is crap, I hate my job, everyone walks all over me, etc. There are many such crises in a person's life, and there are certain moments in one's life, such as early adulthood, when they are most intense. These crises alone are enough to make someone give you a call, though there also must be the belief that these crises mean something, that they must have a meaning. And it is this crisis of narcissism that precipitates a person into analysis. But what this means is a/ that the analytic process is not the only thing that can make semblants vacillate, and b/ that their vacillation is not a sufficient outcome of analysis.

Nevertheless, the fact that the collapse of semblants can lead someone to seek an analysis is in itself suggestive. For a start, it gives things that are of the order of trauma a special significance for us: mourning over an unexpected and sudden loss, a life-threatening illness, violent social strife, war even—all these things that are outside our control are capable of producing lifelong and sometimes radical changes to the person. The fact that these are all things that can produce trauma, from which good things can flow as can bad, indicates that they are also the things that sustain the imaginary of a subject. What happens is that with their collapse the role that semblants play as a refuge for the subject is exposed . . . and this is the sort of crisis that can lead to a demand for analysis.

It is quite an interesting phenomenon – that what appears as one of the possible entries into analysis (the collapse of semblants) is also one of the effects of analysis itself – and, indeed, it is not uncommon that these conditions at the entry throw light on the destabilisation produced by the analysis itself.

It is possible, then, to think of the progress of an analysis as sort of non-traumatic traumatising, or, if you wish, as a controlled decline of the imaginary. In analysis the fall of semblants results, not from the slings and arrows of misfortune; rather, the fall of semblants results, slowly, and in a way regulated by interpretation, from the analysis itself. This of course makes analysis a process that has less to do with the healing of wounds, the recuperation of the subject's identity, or a return to the *status quo ante* in such cases. Interpretation, and indeed the process of analysis itself, are less brutal means of dissolving the artefacts with which the individual's narcissism is surrounded. And a gentle awakening, a slow trauma, as when we say a “slow burn”, that is calculated and ratified by the

subject, is undoubtedly more beneficial than the unforeseen crisis apt to result from the sadism or cynicism of the Other.