

The Birth of the Divided Subject: Ego / Self

Few events have greater significance in the psychological life of a child than the acquisition of language. Between six and eighteen months the infant develops the capacity for psychic representation and the ability to separate from and recognize its own image as other. For example, the infant who has previously shown no sign of recognition when looking in a mirror suddenly begins to smile in seeing its reflected image. This event, perfectly normal in the life of an infant, signals the development of the capacity to recognize its own self-representation.¹[1] The process of looking at and *recognizing its own image as other*, differentiates the psychic image of the child from its physical body. Prior to the mirror stage, the child lacks the capacity to distinguish the subjective from the objective, the representational from the biological. Desire and its object are indistinguishable. For example, if there is hunger, it is not the child's hunger for the infant is incapable of conceiving a "self" separate from its desire. But during the mirror stage, this unity of experience is split and the child develops the capacity to *differentiate the psychic image from biological experience*. The differentiation between the biological infant and the psychic image with which the infant identifies is only the anticipation of a far more profound differentiation of the psyche that will occur during language acquisition. The later process of acquiring language replaces the psychic image of the body with a linguistic image, the first person pronoun.²[2] The visual image is replaced by an acoustic image, e.g. "I" in English. With the acquisition of language comes an ontological rupture between word and body, between description and event. During the mirror stage the human subject becomes possible when neurological development allows the infant to distinguish objects, and the human subject becomes actual when the child develops the capacity for representation.

The development of the capacity to identify with a self-representation is the action upon which all subjectivity is based; it is the moment human reflexivity is born. The infant's discovery of and identification with its 'own image' differentiates the personality into unconscious and conscious, experience and image, literal and metaphorical. Viewing its own image as other *results in the realization that the self-representation actually 'belongs' to the same child viewing and experiencing the psychic image as other*. Octavio Paz describes the subject's experience of otherness this way:

"Otherness" is above all the simultaneous perception that we are others without ceasing to be what we are and that, without ceasing to be where we are, our true being is in another place." (Paz, 1975, p. 245)³[3]

As the infant *views its own image as other*, this very act of viewing simultaneously brings into being the subjectivity of the infant doing the viewing. Self-reflection is the visual experience of the psychic image and the 'real' separated only by the amount of time it takes

the reflected light to return to the child's eye. The act of reflection mixes up the two heterogenous subjects, the image and the real, "I" and other, the fictional and the autobiographical in a single event. This infinitely fast oscillation between the image and the 'real' constitutes the birth of the divided subject (representational self / experiential self; ego / self) and its inherent reflexivity. The extraordinary economy of such a simple event, a child observing its own reflection in the other, perfectly normal in its drama and staging, spontaneously deconstructs the oppositional logic that lies in the Western categorical distinction between the psychic image and the real.⁴[4] The 'first act' of self-reflection produces the very drama it re-views. It is the play and the re-play, the action and the re-action, the cognition and the re-cognition in an infinitely fast oscillation contained within a single event. The child's dramatic performance of the mirror stage consists simply in producing its self. *It is a reflection that creates the self of self-reflection by creating the drama in the very act of re-viewing it.*

The mirror stage is a paradigmatic metaphor for the birth of self-reflexive consciousness and the mutual dependence between the image and the real. There can be no reflection without the real child and there can be no consciousness of the real child without the child imago. The real and the imaginal are co-terminus: each co-implicates the other. The realization that *human subjectivity is constructed through the reflexive creation of representations*, leads to the awareness that we are in language and creating metaphors of ourselves, as well as of our understanding of ourselves, all the time. *The human subject is something constructed through metaphorizing in every dimension of our psychic existence and does not come into being without the participation of an elaborate linguistic environment.* Without the capacity for the self to represent itself, either as an image or as a word, and thereby look back at itself from another perspective, the construction of personality and its characteristic capacity for representation and self-reflection would be impossible.
