Jacques Lacan

In his discussion of the absolute division between the unconscious and the consciousness (or between id and ego), Freud introduces the idea of the human self, or subject, as radically split, divided between these two realms of conscious and unconscious. On the one hand, our usual (Western humanist) ideas of self or personhood are defined by operations of consciousness, including rationality, free will, and self-reflection. For Freud and for psychoanalysis in general, however, actions, thought, belief, and the concepts of "self" are all determined or shaped by the unconscious, and its drives and desires.

Jacques Lacan is a French psychoanalyst. He was originally trained as a psychiatrist, and in the 1930s and 40s worked with psychotic patients; he began in the 1950s to develop his own version of psychoanalysis, based on the ideas articulated in structuralist linguistics and anthropology. You might think of Lacan as Freud + Saussure, with a dash of Levi-Strauss, and even some seasoning of Derrida. But his main influence/precursor is Freud. Lacan reinterprets Freud in light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories, turning psychoanalysis from an essentially humanist philosophy or theory into a post-structuralist one.

One of the basic premises of humanism, as you recall, is that there is such a thing as a stable self, that has all those nice things like free will and self-determination. Freud's notion of the unconscious was one of the ideas that began to question, or to destabilize, that humanist ideal of the self; he was one of the precursors of post-structuralism in that regard. But Freud hoped that, by bringing the contents of the unconscious into consciousness, he could minimize repression and neurosis—he makes a famous declaration about the relation between the unconscious and conscious, saying that "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden": Where It was, shall I be." In other words, the "it," or "id" (unconscious) will be replaced by the "I", by consciousness and self-identity. Freud's goal was to strengthen the ego, the "I" self, the conscious/rational identity, so it would be more powerful than the unconscious.

For Lacan, this project is impossible. The ego can never take the place of the unconscious, or empty it out, or control it, because, for Lacan, the ego or "I" self is only an illusion, a product of the unconscious itself. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the unconscious is the ground of all being.

Where Freud is interested in investigating how the polymorphously perverse child forms an unconscious and a superego and becomes a civilized and productive (as well as correctly heterosexual) adult, Lacan is interested in how the infant gets this illusion we call a "self." His essay on the Mirror Stage describes that process, showing how the infant forms an illusion of an ego, of a unified conscious self identified by the word "I."

Central to the conception of the human, in Lacan, is the notion that the unconscious, which governs all factors of human existence, is structured like a language. He bases this on Freud's account of the two main mechanisms of unconscious processes, condensation and displacement. Both are essentially linguistic phenomena, where meaning is either condensed (in metaphor) or displaced (in metonymy). Lacan notes that Freud's dream analyses, and most of his analyses of the unconscious symbolism used by his patients, depend on word-play—on puns, associations, etc. that are chiefly verbal. Lacan says that the contents of the unconscious are acutely aware of language, and particularly of the structure of language.

And here he follows ideas laid out by Saussure, but modifies them a bit. Where Saussure talked about the relations between signifier and signified, which form a sign, and insisted that the structure of language is the negative relation among signs (one sign is what it is because it is not another sign), Lacan focuses on relations between signifiers alone. The elements in the unconscious—wishes, desires, images—all form signifiers (and they're usually expressed in verbal terms), and these signifiers form a "signifying chain"—one signifier has meaning only because it is not some other signifier. For Lacan, there are no signifieds; there is nothing that a signifier ultimately refers to. If there were, then the meaning of any particular signifier would be relatively stable—there would be (in Saussure's terms) a relation of signification between signifier and signified, and that...
relation would create or guarantee some kind of meaning. Lacan says those relations of signification don't exist (in the unconscious, at least); rather, there are only the negative relations, relations of value, where one signifier is what it is because it's nothing else.

Because of this lack of signifieds, Lacan says, the chain of signifiers--\( x = y = z = b = q = 0 = \% = | = s \) (etc.)--is constantly sliding and shifting and circulating. There is no anchor, nothing that ultimately gives meaning or stability to the whole system. The chain of signifiers is constantly in play (in Derrida's sense); there's no way to stop sliding down the chain--no way to say "oh, \( x \) means this," and have it be definitive. Rather, one signifier only leads to another signifier, and never to a signified. It's kind of like a dictionary--one word only leads you to more words, but never to the things the words supposedly represent.

Lacan says this is what the unconscious looks like--a continually circulating chain (or multiple chains) of signifiers, with no anchor--or, to use Derrida's terms, no center. This is Lacan's linguistic translation of Freud's picture of the unconscious as this chaotic realm of constantly shifting drives and desires. Freud is interested in how to bring those chaotic drives and desires into consciousness, so that they can have some order and sense and meaning, so they can be understood and made manageable. Lacan, on the other hand, says that the process of becoming an adult, a "self," is the process of trying to fix, to stabilize, to stop the chain of signifiers so that stable meaning--including the meaning of "I"--becomes possible. Though of course Lacan says that this possibility is only an illusion, an image created by a misperception of the relation between body and self.

But I'm getting too far ahead of where we're going.

Freud talks about the 3 stages of polymorphous perversity in infants: the oral, the anal, and the phallic; it's the Oedipus complex and Castration complex that end polymorphous perversity and create "adult" beings. Lacan creates different categories to explain a similar trajectory, from infant to "adult." He talks about 3 concepts--need, demand, and desire--that roughly correspond to 3 phases of development, or 3 fields in which humans develop--the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Symbolic realm, which is marked by the concept of desire (I'll explain this in more detail later) is the equivalent of adulthood; or, more specifically for Lacan, the Symbolic realm is the structure of language itself, which we have to enter into in order to become speaking subjects, in order to say "I" and have "I" designate something which appears to be stable.

Like Freud, Lacan's infant starts out as something inseparable from its mother; there's no distinction between self and other, between baby and mother (at least, from the baby's perspective). In fact, the baby (for both Freud and Lacan) is a kind of blob, with no sense of self or individuated identity, and no sense even of its body as a coherent unified whole. This baby-blob is driven by NEED; it needs food, it needs comfort/safety, it needs to be changed, etc. These needs are satisfiable, and can be satisfied by an object. When the baby needs food, it gets a breast (or a bottle); when it needs safety, it gets hugged. The baby, in this state of NEED, doesn't recognize any distinction between itself and the objects that meet its needs; it doesn't recognize that an object (like a breast) is part of another whole person (because it doesn't have any concept yet of "whole person"). There's no distinction between it and anyone or anything else; there are only needs and things that satisfy those needs.

This is the state of "nature," which has to be broken up in order for culture to be formed. This is true in both Freud's psychoanalysis and in Lacan's: the infant must separate from its mother, form a separate identity, in order to enter into civilization. That separation entails some kind of LOSS; when the child knows the difference between itself and its mother, and starts to become an individuated being, it loses that primal sense of unity (and safety/security) that it originally had. This is the element of the tragic built into psychoanalytic theory (whether Freudian or Lacanian): to become a civilized "adult" always entails the profound loss of an original unity, a non-differentiation, a merging with others (particularly the mother).

The baby who has not yet made this separation, who has only needs which are satisfiable, and which makes no distinction between itself and the objects that satisfy its needs, exists in the realm of the REAL, according to Lacan. The Real is a place (a psychic place, not a physical place) where there is this original unity. Because of
that, there is no absence or loss or lack; the Real is all fullness and completeness, where there's no need that can't be satisfied. And because there is no absence or loss or lack, there is no language in the Real.

Let me back up a bit to explain that. Lacan here follows an argument Freud made about the idea of loss. In a case study which appears in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud talks about his nephew, aged about 18 months, who is playing a game with a spool tied with yarn. The kid throws the spool away, and says "Fort," which is German for "gone." He pulls the spool back in, and says "Da," which is German for "here." Freud says that this game was symbolic for the kid, a way of working out his anxiety about his mother's absence. When he threw the spool and said "Fort," he replayed the experience of the loss of a beloved object; when he reeled it in and said "Da," he got pleasure from the restoration of the object.

Lacan takes this case and focuses, of course, on the aspect of language it displays. Lacan says that the fort/da game, which Freud said happened when his nephew was about 18 months old, is about the child's entry into the Symbolic, or into the structure of language itself. Lacan says that language is always about loss or absence; you only need words when the object you want is gone. If your world was all fullness, with no absence, then you wouldn't need language. (Jonathan Swift, in *Gulliver's Travels*, has a version of this: a culture where there is no language, and people carry all the objects they need to refer to on their backs).

Thus in the realm of the Real, according to Lacan, there is no language because there is no loss, no lack, no absence; there is only complete fullness, needs and the satisfaction of needs. Hence the Real is always beyond language, unrepresentable in language (and therefore irretrievably lost when one enters into language).

The Real, and the phase of need, last from birth till somewhere between 6 and 18 months, when the baby blob starts to be able to distinguish between its body and everything else in the world. At this point, the baby shifts from having needs to having DEMANDS. Demands are not satisfiable with objects; a demand is always a demand for recognition from another, for love from another. The process works like this: the baby starts to become aware that it is separate from the mother, and that there exist things that are not part of it; thus the idea of "other" is created. (Note, however, that as yet the binary opposition of "self/other" doesn't yet exist, because the baby still doesn't have a coherent sense of "self"). That awareness of separation, or the fact of otherness, creates an anxiety, a sense of loss. The baby then demands a reunion, a return to that original sense of fullness and non-separation that it had in the Real. But that is impossible, once the baby knows (and this knowing, remember, is all happening on an unconscious level) that the idea of an "other" exists. The baby demands to be filled by the other, to return to the sense of original unity; the baby wants the idea of "other" to disappear. Demand is thus the demand for the fullness, the completeness, of the other that will stop up the lack the baby is experiencing. But of course this is impossible, because that lack, or absence, the sense of "other"ness, is the condition for the baby becoming a self/subject, a functioning cultural being.

Because the demand is for recognition from the other, it can't really be satisfied, if only because the 6-to-18 month infant can't SAY what it wants. The baby cries, and the mother gives it a bottle, or a breast, or a pacifier, or something, but no object can satisfy the demand--the demand is for a response on a different level. The baby can't recognize the ways the mother does respond to it, and recognize it, because it doesn't yet have a conception of itself as a thing--it only knows that this idea of "other" exists, and that it is separate from the "other", but it doesn't yet have an idea of what its "self" is.

This is where Lacan’s MIRROR STAGE happens. At this age--between 6 and 18 months--the baby or child hasn't yet mastered its own body; it doesn't have control over its own movements, and it doesn't have a sense of its body as a whole. Rather, the baby experiences its body as fragmented, or in pieces--whatever part is within its field of vision is there as long as the baby can see it, but gone when the baby can't see it. It may see its own hand, but it doesn't know that that hand belongs to it--the hand could belong to anyone, or no one. However, the child in this stage can imagine itself as whole--because it has seen other people, and perceived them as whole beings.
Lacan says that at some point in this period, the baby will see itself in a mirror. It will look at its reflection, then look back at a real person--its mother, or some other person--then look again at the mirror image. The child moves "from insufficiency to anticipation" in this action; the mirror, and the moving back and forth from mirror image to other people, gives it a sense that it, too, is an integrated being, a whole person. The child, still unable to be whole, and hence separate from others (though it has this notion of separation), in the mirror stage begins to anticipate being whole. It moves from a "fragmented body" to an "orthopedic vision of its totality", to a vision of itself as whole and integrated, which is "orthopedic" because it serves as a crutch, a corrective instrument, an aid to help the child achieve the status of wholeness.

What the child anticipates is a sense of self as a unified separate whole; the child sees that it looks like what "others" look like. Eventually, this entity the child sees in the mirror, this whole being, will be a "self," the entity designated by the word "I." What is really happening, however, is an identification that is a MISRECOGNITION. The child sees an image in the mirror; it thinks, that image is "ME". But it's NOT the child; it's only an image. But another person (usually the mother) is there to reinforce the misrecognition. The baby looks in the mirror, and looks back at mother, and the mother says, "Yes, it's you!" She guarantees the "reality" of the connection between the child and its image, and the idea of the integrated whole body the child is seeing and identifying with.

The child takes that image in the mirror as the summation of its entire being, its "self." This process, of misrecognizing one's self in the image in the mirror, creates the EGO, the thing that says "I." In Lacan's terms, this misrecognition creates the "armor" of the subject, an illusion or misperception of wholeness, integration, and totality that surrounds and protects the fragmented body. To Lacan, ego, or self, or "I"dentity, is always on some level a FANTASY, an identification with an external image, and not an internal sense of separate whole identity.

This is why Lacan calls the phase of demand, and the mirror stage, the realm of the IMAGINARY. The idea of a self is created through an Imaginary identification with the image in the mirror. The realm of the Imaginary is where the alienated relation of self to its own image is created and maintained. The Imaginary is a realm of images, whether conscious or unconscious. It's prelinguistic, and preoedipal, but very much based in visual perception, or what Lacan calls specular imaging.

The mirror image, the whole person the baby mistakes as itself, is known in psychoanalytic terminology as an "ideal ego," a perfect whole self who has no insufficiency. This "ideal ego" becomes internalized; we build our sense of "self," our "I"dentity, by (mis)identifying with this ideal ego. By doing this, according to Lacan, we imagine a self that has no lack, no notion of absence or incompleteness. The fiction of the stable, whole, unified self that we see in the mirror becomes a compensation for having lost the original oneness with the mother's body. In short, according to Lacan, we lose our unity with the mother's body, the state of "nature," in order to enter culture, but we protect ourselves from the knowledge of that loss by misperceiving ourselves as not lacking anything--as being complete unto ourselves.

Lacan says that the child's self-concept (its ego or "I"dentity) will never match up to its own being. Its IMAGO in the mirror is both smaller and more stable than the child, and is always "other" than the child--something outside it. The child, for the rest of its life, will misrecognize its self as "other, as the image in the mirror that provides an illusion of self and of mastery.

The Imaginary is the psychic place, or phase, where the child projects its ideas of "self" onto the mirror image it sees. The mirror stage cements a self/other dichotomy, where previously the child had known only "other," but not "self." For Lacan, the identification of "self" is always in terms of "other." This is not the same as a binary opposition, where "self" = what is not "other," and "other" = what is not "self." Rather, "self" IS "other", in Lacan's view; the idea of the self, that inner being we designate by "I," is based on an image, an other. The concept of self relies on one's misidentification with this image of an other.
Lacan uses the term "other" in a number of ways, which make it even harder to grasp. First, and perhaps the easiest, is in the sense of self/other, where "other" is the "not-me;" but, as we have seen, the "other" becomes "me" in the mirror stage. Lacan also uses an idea of Other, with a capital "O", to distinguish between the concept of the other and actual others. The image the child sees in the mirror is an other, and it gives the child the idea of Other as a structural possibility, one which makes possible the structural possibility of "I" or self. In other words, the child encounters actual others--its own image, other people--and understands the idea of "Otherness," things that are not itself. According to Lacan, the notion of Otherness, encountered in the Imaginary phase (and associated with demand), comes before the sense of "self," which is built on the idea of Otherness.

When the child has formulated some idea of Otherness, and of a self identified with its own "other," its own mirror image, then the child begins to enter the Symbolic realm. The Symbolic and the Imaginary are overlapping, unlike Freud's phases of development; there's no clear marker or division between the two, and in some respects they always coexist. The Symbolic order is the structure of language itself; we have to enter it in order to become speaking subjects, and to designate ourselves by "I." The foundation for having a self lies in the Imaginary projection of the self onto the specular image, the other in the mirror, and having a self is expressed in saying "I," which can only occur within the Symbolic, which is why the two coexist.

The fort/da game that the nephew played, in Freud's account, is in Lacan's view a marker of the entry into the Symbolic, because Hans is using language to negotiate the idea of absence and the idea of Otherness as a category or structural possibility. The spool, according to Lacan, serves as an "objet petit a," or "objet petit autre"--an object which is a little "other," a small-o other. In throwing it away, the child recognizes that others can disappear; in pulling it back, the child recognizes that others can return. Lacan emphasizes the former, insisting that Little Hans is primarily concerned with the idea of lack or absence of the "objet petit autre."

The "little other" illustrates for the child the idea of lack, of loss, of absence, showing the child that it isn't complete in and of itself. It is also the gateway to the Symbolic order, to language, since language itself is premised on the idea of lack or absence.

Lacan says these ideas--of other and Other, of lack and absence, of the (mis)identification of self with o/Other--are all worked out on an individual level, with each child, but they form the basic structures of the Symbolic order, of language, which the child must enter in order to become an adult member of culture. Thus the otherness acted out in the fort/da game (as well as by the distinctions made in the Mirror Phase between self and other, mother and child) become categorical or structural ideas. So, in the Symbolic, there is a structure (or structuring principle) of Otherness, and a structuring principle of Lack.

The Other (capital O) is a structural position in the Symbolic order. It is the place that everyone is trying to get to, to merge with, in order to get rid of the separation between "self" and "other." It is, in Derrida's sense, the CENTER of the system, of the Symbolic and/or of language itself. As such, the Other is the thing to which every element relates. But, as the center, the Other (again, not a person but a position) can't be merged with. Nothing can be in the center with the Other, even though everything in the system (people, e.g.) want to be. So the position of the Other creates and sustains a never-ending LACK, which Lacan calls DESIRE. Desire is the desire to be the Other. By definition, desire can never be fulfilled: it's not desire for some object (which would be need) or desire for love or another person's recognition of oneself (which would be demand), but desire to be the center of the system, the center of the Symbolic, the center of language itself.

The center has a lot of names in Lacanian theory. It's the Other; it's also called the PHALLUS. Here's where Lacan borrows again from Freud's original Oedipus theory.

The mirror stage is pre-oedipal. The self is constructed in relation to an other, to the idea of Other, and the self wants to merge with the Other. As in Freud's world, the most important other in the child's life is the mother; so the child wants to merge with her mother. In Lacan's terms, this is the child's demand that the self/other split be erased. The child decides that it can merge with the mother if it becomes what the mother wants it to be--in
Lacan’s terms, the child tries to fulfill the mother’s desire. The mother’s desire (formed by her own entry into the Symbolic, because she is already an adult) is to not have lack, or Lack (or to be the Other, the center, the place where nothing is lacking). This fits with the Freudian version of the Oedipus complex, where the child wants to merge with its mother by having sexual intercourse with her. In Freud’s model, the idea of lack is represented by the lack of a penis. The boy who wants to sleep with his mother wants to complete her lack by filling her up with his penis.

In Freud’s view, what breaks this oedipal desire up, for boys anyway, is the father, who threatens castration. The father threatens to make the boy experience lack, the absence of the penis, if he tries to use his penis to make up for the mother’s lack of a penis. In Lacan’s terms, the threat of castration is a metaphor for the whole idea of Lack as a structural concept. For Lacan, it isn’t the real father who threatens castration. Rather, because the idea of lack, or Lack, is essential to the concept of language, because the concept of Lack is part of the basic structuration of language, the father becomes a function of the linguistic structure. The Father, rather than being a person, becomes a structuring principle of the Symbolic order.

For Lacan, Freud’s angry father becomes the Name-of-the-Father, or the Law-of-the-Father, or sometimes just the Law. Submission to the rules of language itself—the Law of the Father—is required in order to enter into the Symbolic order. To become a speaking subject, you have to be subjected to, you have to obey, the laws and rules of language. Lacan designates the idea of the structure of language, and its rules, as specifically paternal. He calls the rules of language the Law-of-the-Father in order to link the entry into the Symbolic, the structure of language, to Freud’s notion of the oedipus and castration complexes.

The Law-of-the-Father, or Name-of-the-Father, is another term for the Other, for the center of the system, the thing that governs the whole structure—its shape and how all the elements in the system can move and form relationships. This center is also called the Phallus, to underline even more the patriarchal nature of the Symbolic order. The Phallus, as center, limits the play of elements, and gives stability to the whole structure. The Phallus anchors the chains of signifiers which, in the unconscious, are just floating and unfixed, always sliding and shifting. The Phallus stops play, so that signifiers can have some stable meaning. It is because the Phallus is the center of the Symbolic order, of language, that the term “I” designates the idea of the self (and, additionally, why any other word has stable meaning).

The Phallus is not the same as the penis. Penises belong to individuals; the Phallus belongs to the structure of language itself. No one has it, just like no one governs language or rules language. Rather, the Phallus is the center. It governs the whole structure, it’s what everyone wants to be (or have), but no one can get there (no element of the system can take the place of the center). That’s what Lacan calls DESIRE: the desire, which is never satisfied, because it can never be satisfied, to be the center, to rule the system.

Lacan says that boys can think they have a shot at being the Phallus, at occupying the position of center, because they have penises. Girls have a harder time misperceiving themselves as having a shot at the Phallus because they are (as Freud says) constituted by and as lack, lacking a penis, and the Phallus is a place where there is no lack. But, Lacan says, every subject in language is constituted by/as lack, or Lack. The only reason we have language at all is because of the loss, or lack, of the union with the maternal body. In fact, it is the necessity to become part of ”culture," to become subjects in language, that forces that absence, loss, lack.

The distinction between the sexes is significant in Lacan’s theory, though not in the same way it is in Freud's. This is what Lacan talks about in ”The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” on p. 741. He has two drawings there. One is of the word ”Tree" over a picture of a tree—the basic Saussurean concept, of signifier (word) over signified (object). Then he has another drawing, of two identical doors (the signifieds). But over each door is a different word: one says ”Ladies" and the other says ”Gentlemen." Lacan explains, on p. 742:

"A train arrives at a station. A little boy and a little girl, brother and sister, are seated in a compartment face to face next to the window through which the buildings along the station platform can be seen passing as the train
pulls to a stop. 'Look,' says the brother, 'We're at Ladies!' 'Idiot!' replies his sister, 'Can't you see we're at Gentlemen.'"

This anecdote shows how boys and girls enter the Symbolic order, the structure of language, differently. In Lacan's view, each child can only see the signifier of the other gender; each child constructs its world view, its understanding of the relation between sfr and sfd in naming locations, as the consequence of seeing an "other." As Lacan puts it (742), "For these children, Ladies and Gentlemen will be henceforth two countries toward which each of their souls will strive on divergent wings..." Each child, each sex, has a particular position within the Symbolic order; from that position, each sex can only see (or signify) the otherness of the other sex. You might take Lacan's drawing of the two doors literally: these are the doors, with their gender distinctions, through which each child must pass in order to enter into the Symbolic realm.

So, to summarize. Lacan's theory starts with the idea of the Real; this is the union with the mother's body, which is a state of nature, and must be broken up in order to build culture. Once you move out of the Real, you can never get back, but you always want to. This is the first idea of an irretrievable loss or lack.

Next comes the Mirror stage, which constitutes the Imaginary. Here you grasp the idea of others, and begin to understand Otherness as a concept or a structuring principle, and thus begin to formulate a notion of "self". This "self" (as seen in the mirror) is in fact an other, but you misrecognize it as you, and call it "self." (Or, in non-theory language, you look in the mirror and say "hey, that's me." But it's not--it's just an image).

This sense of self, and its relation to others and to Other, sets you up to take up a position in the Symbolic order, in language. Such a position allows you to say "I", to be a speaking subject. "I" (and all other words) have a stable meaning because they are fixed, or anchored, by the Other/Phallus/Name-of-the-Father/Law, which is the center of the Symbolic, the center of language.

In taking up a position in the Symbolic, you enter through a gender-marked doorway; the position for girls is different than the position for boys. Boys are closer to the Phallus than girls, but no one is or has the Phallus--it's the center. Your position in the Symbolic, like the position of all other signifying elements (signifiers) is fixed by the Phallus; unlike the unconscious, the chains of signifiers in the Symbolic don't circulate and slide endlessly because the Phallus limits play.

Paradoxically--as if all this wasn't bad enough!--the Phallus and the Real are pretty similar. Both are places where things are whole, complete, full, unified, where there's no lack, or Lack. Both are places that are inaccessible to the human subject-in-language. But they are also opposite: the Real is the maternal, the ground from which we spring, the nature we have to separate from in order to have culture; the Phallus is the idea of the Father, the patriarchal order of culture, the ultimate idea of culture, the position which rules everything in the world.

As you might imagine, feminist critics, whom we'll start talking about on Wednesday, have a lot to say about Lacan, as they do about Freud.

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