

Plato versus Lacan On the Matter of Self-Knowledge

Raoul Mortley*

Abstract: The first Alcibiades may or may not be from Plato; it concerns the demonstration of ignorance, which Socrates administers; Socrates advocates self-knowledge, in the words of the Delphic Oracle, “know thyself”; Socrates makes clear that self-knowledge comes through the eye of the other person, who provides a mirror for self-contemplation; the mirror in antiquity was very inadequate and only provided distorted or blurred reflections, and was often identified with magic; the 17th-century mirrors made in Paris were revolutionary and for the first time created a true reflection; Lacan, in the city of mirrors, advocates the modern mirror as providing the stage for the assumption of the ego, but later moves to a more Platonic position, that the self is located in the midst of others; is the mirror stage in Lacan contradicted by his evolving thought?

Keywords: Ignorance, Know Thyself, First Alcibiades, Socrates, therapy, *askesis*, Heidegger, Plato, Lacan, bewilderment, mirror, mirror stage, the other, eye, *paradeigma*, Freud, Saint Gobain, ego

The First Alcibiades and Plato

Plato’s *First Alcibiades*, somewhat like the *Charmides*, is about ignorance, and both dialogues refer to the Delphic injunction, “know thyself”. The theme of self-knowledge is crucial in both and the proposition seems to be that good self-understanding is crucial for the practice of philosophy, and is indeed the first step in this pursuit. In the *First Alcibiades*, there is the classic erotic starting point of Socrates’ attraction to Alcibiades, which has strangely not been acted upon: Socrates has experienced a kind of reticence because his guardian spirit has warned him against approaching Alcibiades. Alcibiades is said to be the foremost in beauty, stature and family connections in the whole of Athens.¹ The distance which Socrates establishes between himself and Alcibiades is very far from the closeness of the party setting of the *Symposium*, and the character of Alcibiades is to some extent not filled in, in the way which we would have expected from the other dialogues. Alcibiades is strangely passive and submits to the Socratic cross-questioning without any protestation or commentary on the process. He does however, suggest that Socrates has been stalking him through a kind of mute and unexplained presence wherever Alcibiades goes.²

On the dialogue itself, the *First Alcibiades* was regarded as central in late antiquity, a preferred starting point for understanding the thought of Plato. In the 19th century, doubt was cast over its authenticity and there is an ongoing debate about this matter. It is too easy to brush this aside and consider the dialogue to be an accepted part of the Platonic tradition, as presenting ideas which can be evaluated independently of their authorship. Other dialogues of Plato deal with similar issues: in *Alcibiades I* the problem of self-knowledge is raised, but this issue is also dealt with in the *Charmides*, and to some extent in the *Phaedo*, and so there is an issue of whether we can legitimately use passages from these other dialogues in order to elucidate passages from *Alcibiades I*.

The Therapy of Socrates: The Demonstration of Ignorance

In this paper, which is more concerned with ideas than authorship questions, we will treat the dialogue as if it is at least Platonic, if not of Plato himself. The question of ignorance is paramount: Socrates supposes Alcibiades to have some ambition in life, or at least the desire for something more than he presently has, and he sketches out what he imagines this to be, namely gaining an

* Raoul Mortley, Emeritus Profess at Bond University of Australia.

¹ *Alcibiades I*, 104a.

² 104d.

understanding of the statesman of supreme competence as well as enjoying a very high degree of respect, such as that of Pericles himself. Alcibiades does not seek to deny this, but refers to Socrates' perpetual silence in the episodes mentioned above, where he followed Alcibiades about without saying anything, and Alcibiades simply contents himself with the question of whether Socrates is the only pathway available to him in pursuit of these goals. This is part of the passivity exhibited by Alcibiades in his discussion with Socrates, as Socrates asks whether Alcibiades minds having questions put to him, and whether he would mind answering them, and Alcibiades agrees.

On this, Socrates begins the long process of demonstrating that Alcibiades is unaware of his own ignorance, of what he is ignorant about. He asks first on what matter Alcibiades proposes to advise the Athenian citizens, assuming of course that he has a position of greater knowledge than they do, and Alcibiades affirms that he is a good advisor on things which he knows about: Socrates then lists the things which Alcibiades has actually refused to learn, such as playing the flute, but notes that he was willing to learn about writing, wrestling and playing the harp. It is thus established that he has voluntarily eliminated certain areas of knowledge from his personal capacity, but of course the Athenians in their public gatherings do not want advice on the other matters, such as playing the harp, on certain throws and general wrestling techniques. The focus is to be on public affairs, and deliberating over matters of war and peace.¹ Throughout the discussion, the template for analysis is based on the idea of the art, or skill (*techne*), which is familiar from the *Republic*: there are certain kinds of specialization – crafts of different types – and in each of these there are rules and techniques which lead to the best possible outcome.

The subject of ignorance begins to come up in 109d, in the form of the question “did you overlook the fact that you did not know this, or have I overlooked it?”. In attempting to expose Alcibiades, Socrates uses the idea of both discovery and enquiry. Socrates concedes that Alcibiades might know something if he had indeed discovered it, but discovery would only follow a process of search.² The specific issue is the difference between what is just and what is unjust, and Socrates advances the idea that it is only at the moment of discovering that one does not know the answer, that one begins to seek. Alcibiades parries this by suggesting that he thought he knew the answer, and indeed thought so for a considerable period of time. Even in childhood, says Socrates, you will have had an idea of what was just and unjust, because in your childhood games you would have had a sense of being cheated or wronged from time to time. So, was there never a moment of recognition of ignorance, the state which generates the search or the process of enquiry, which then leads to discovery?

The problem here is that there are two types of experience of ignorance, one involving more or less obvious cases of recognizing one's own ignorance, for example not knowing the meaning of a word, or not knowing the location of a country. That is a regular occurrence, and one looks up a dictionary or consults a map – a process of search resulting from a common recognition of ignorance. One is not astounded or driven into a state of bewilderment over the recognition of such ignorance. But the more deceptive situation is that in which one is reasonably certain or at least does not question long held views, and this functional certainty is the one where trouble occurs, as these views may be mistaken, but not recognized to be so. In this situation, for the recognition of ignorance to be achieved there must be a circuit breaker, or a kind of Socrates figure who breaks in and tests “knowledge” of this kind. This is the therapeutic service rendered by Socrates.

Just when we appear to be heading towards the idea that such knowledge might be innate, Alcibiades turns it around and says that he has learnt things from the community: that is, how he learnt to speak Greek, and therefore could not say specifically who was his teacher. This is a serious point because Alcibiades is saying that he learnt these things not from experts but from a wide social circle, his community. This is where we get the functional certainty on which we rely.

Socrates however, appears to head for an elite, specialist view of education and attempts to refute Alcibiades with this kind of view. Yet here, Alcibiades foreshadows Lacan to an extent, with the Heideggerian emphasis which Lacan adopts, on self-development through being in the

¹ 107d.

² 109d.

“midst of people”.¹ Socrates is attempting to draw him towards the idea of an *askesis*, a set of spiritual and intellectual exercises, carried out under the tutelage of the highly educated ones in our midst.

In the course of the argument, he causes Alcibiades difficulties in matters on which Alcibiades was quite confident, and this induces a psychological state of perplexity and bewilderment (the Greek verb used is *plano*, which suggests wandering, mental wandering and bewilderment). So that ignorance is not only an epistemological state, but has psychological overtones: ignorance is both an epistemic and an emotional state.

Alcibiades: But by the gods, Socrates, I do not even know what I am saying, but I seem to be altogether in a strange state – and under your questioning I seem to feel one way at one time, and then another.

Socrates: And are you then ignorant my friend of what this feeling is?

Alcibiades: Completely.

Socrates goes on to make the point that the feeling of bewilderment comes from supposing that one knows the matter thoroughly and knows the answer, when one does not and this then becomes apparent.² If one were unaware of the ingredients for cooking a certain dish, it could be happily entrusted to another person without these feelings of confusion or bewilderment, and similarly if one were at sea one would happily entrust the steering of the ship to the helmsman. These are cases in which one happily admits one’s ignorance. The conclusion is drawn that mistakes occur owing to ignorance of the limits of one’s knowledge or “ignorance of ignorance”. The ability to recognize what one does not know is crucial, not only in terms of avoiding mistakes, but in terms of personal happiness. Again, we note the holistic psychological dimension where the recognition of ignorance is essential to personal well-being.

Self-knowledge and the mirror in the eye of the other

This sets the scene for a whole discussion of self-knowledge, and as is astutely observed by Renault and Tarrant,³ the questioning and answering process set out here holds up a mirror to Alcibiades, a mirror in which he may observe himself.

This is the kind of mirror which Lacan will later say may provide a terrifying experience for a patient dealing with the mirror provided by the psychoanalyst, and this is the probably the “bewilderment” or “wandering” already adumbrated by Plato. Thus, the first part of the dialogue is a demonstration of the need for such a mirror, and we will come to this shortly. In the meantime, the Delphic injunction “know thyself” comes up several times before being discussed more fully. We have seen Alcibiades taken through a process of self-understanding, which involved starting with the recognition of ignorance, and most importantly knowing exactly that of which he was ignorant. This sets the scene for a further discussion of self-knowledge, which begins to be hinted at in 124a. In the midst of a long disquisition on the importance of an elitist education for those who would be rulers, Socrates exhorts Alcibiades to heed the Delphic motto “know thyself”, and this is in the context of the idea that only hard work and developed skill will see him through the task he has set himself, of excelling in politics.⁴ The idea is that self-knowledge is going to involve work.

There is a strong hint in 129a that self-knowledge is a hard thing, and only available to the few, and indeed everything Socrates has been describing leads to the idea of a considerable amount of toil, care, and self-preparation in the task of obtaining self-knowledge. We are reminded of the elitism of the educational system in the *Republic*, and the view seems to be that it is only a very few who are capable of the self-analysis and self-care which will lead to a position of being able to exercise leadership wisely.

¹ See below.

² 117c.

³ Renault, François and Tarrant, Harold 2015. *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 99.

⁴ *Alcibiades* 1, 124b.

Socrates: Come then, in what way can the self-identical be discovered? For thus we would discover what we are ourselves: if we remain in ignorance of this, we must surely remain incapable.¹

Thus, the urgency of the task is clear: unless we deal with our own ignorance, firstly by recognizing it, and secondly by taking care to overcome it, we will be incapable of playing a role in society. Finally, we return to the next attempt to apprehend the Delphic injunction as Socrates chooses to understand it by using the analogy of sight. It is not, however, self-evident that we should understand self-knowledge by use of the analogy of sight, comparing knowing to seeing. I have elsewhere commented on the use of analogy in Plato and in general,² but here the word used is *paradeigma*, and Socrates says that the comparison with seeing is the only comparison or model (*paradeigma*) available.³ The running together of knowledge and sight is a whole other issue in Plato.

This then leads us to the mirror represented by the eye of the other, and what one sees in the eye of the other is one's own self-image:

Socrates: Now you consider this: if just as if speaking to a man, the Oracle had advised our eye "see yourself", how would we grasp the advice given? Wouldn't it be looking at that, looking into which enabled our eye to see itself.

Alcibiades: Clearly

Socrates: Let us then think what there is, by looking into which we can see both it and ourselves.

Alcibiades: Clearly Socrates, mirrors⁴ and such things.

Socrates: You are right, and there is something of this kind in the eye with which we see?

Alcibiades: Certainly.

Socrates: And have you noticed that the face of the person who looks into another's eye, is shown in the eye before him, as in a mirror, and we call this the pupil,⁵ being a sort of image of the person looking?

Moving on, Socrates observes that if the eye looks at any other thing it will not see itself: it is only if an eye looks at another eye, that it sees itself and this is because it looks at something else which has the particular capacity of sight, which it itself has.⁶ The eye making contact with and gazing at another eye is an act which has the specific quality of reflexivity, and is a unique form of seeing. And extending the chosen model of sight, Socrates goes back to the soul, and how the soul would look at itself, and what it would look at in order to perceive itself: this is the mirror of another soul, and in particular the wisdom of that other soul. There is a troublesome passage, troublesome to some, in which Socrates says:

Then this part of the soul resembles God, and whoever looks into this, knowing all that is divine, [God and prudence], would thus know himself most completely.

¹ 129b: Socrates here suddenly refers to the Platonic form. This is one of the formulaic passages which causes scholars to refer to the "handbook" character of the dialogue.

² Mortley, Raoul 2017. Analogy and Comparatism: A Response to G.E.R. Lloyd, *Fortunes of Analogy*, *Australasian Philosophical Review*, 1/17: 250-258.

³ *Alcibiades* 1, 132d.

⁴ The original Greek word is "katoptron".

⁵ The word 'pupil' refers to a 'student', originating from the late 14th century, originally coming from the Old French *pupille*, meaning "orphan child, ward," and directly from Latin *pupillus*. The Latin word *pupilla* originally meant "little girl-doll," diminutive of *pupa* "girl; doll" called so because of the tiny image one sees of oneself reflected in the eye of another. Somewhat similarly the Greek word *kore* can mean "girl", or "maiden", equally "puppet", or "little doll", but also refers to the pupil of the eye, possibly because little images appeared within it. This etymology is curious: but notice that Socrates says that the pupil is the image, not that the image is contained within the pupil.

⁶ 133b.

In the Perseus edition (and the Loeb), the Greek has the words ‘God’ and ‘prudence’, but they are treated as an interpolation and not given in the English, as I have done above.¹ It does not seem impossible to reconcile them with other parts of Plato: the connection between God, or the Good, or the One with the best elements of the soul is feasible within the framework of Plato’s thought.

Nevertheless, our purpose here is not theological, but to dwell on the idea that self-recognition comes from the mirror presented by the eye of the other person. The eye is not so much a metaphor as a model for understanding the relationship between self and the other, and Plato establishes that like must look at like in order to find a self-image. Gaze upon gaze yields a two-way self-understanding, whereas gaze directed elsewhere simply delivers an object to the gazing subject.

The demonstration of Alcibiades’ ignorance is intended to demonstrate that Alcibiades has been enabled to measure himself against the mirror presented by Socrates, and his example. This then is the theme of our paper, namely the idea that self-knowledge comes from exposure to the other, and not from private self-investigation. The enquiry into ourselves alone and in solitude, without reference to others and how they see us will not yield self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is built up by encounters and interactions and repeated encounters over many years and in many situations. If there are too few encounters, there will not be enough self-study available to form an understanding. Initial encounters are with family and then circle of friends, and institutions such as schools, followed by the interaction arising from immersion in another culture, which produces a whole different set of self-images arising from the eye of the foreigner and the speaker of another language. At first the eye of the cultural other may seem to present an entirely different being to the gaze of the self-knower, but in time the commonalities become clear, though in another form, in another tone, and another register. Cultural awareness is not simply about sensitivity to others, but self-awareness is also required if cultural awareness is to be achieved, and that means that the perception by the other, emanating from the other must be embraced and registered.

Mirrors ancient and modern

Mirrors in antiquity were not technologically advanced and it was actually very hard to find an image of oneself, perhaps impossible. The clearest images would have been actually the one available through the eye of the other person, albeit tiny, and the one available to Narcissus who stared at his own image as reflected in still water. These are limited opportunities. The best possibility in antiquity may have been to stare into a dish of still water.

The mirrors of antiquity were made of polished stone, such as obsidian, copper or bronze and the glass mirror as we know it was not available. The kind of image available in such crude mirrors would have been unclear and lacking in definition, and may not have provided much visual information at all. The mirror was frequently used as an instrument of divination: Clement of Alexandria attacks this as a pagan rite.² Zosimus describes a metal made of a compound of silver and gold which was used for the fabrication of mirrors which possessed magical properties: such mirrors could deflect the lightning, protect from demons, and had the power to transform the image of the person using them – anything but give a true reflection.³

This is a very different way to live, in that self-image was not available to the ancient, at least in any clear form, though it was clearly sought because there were so many different types of mirror available as we know from the archaeology of Greece, Rome, and ancient China. The distorted image being the only one available from the ancient mirror, it came to be thought that the mirror contained some other suggestion, some magic even, and thus the ancient use of mirrors in the practice of magic, under the name of ‘katoptromancy’, was common.

The modern mirror returns an exact image, and the only way it can be varied is by varying the input, such as by changing one’s appearance, and when that is done there is no possibility of doubt: the addition to the reality observed has come about by one’s own agency. But with an ancient mirror the murkiness of the image led people to speculate about the meanings of various shapes

¹ See Renault and Tarrant [2016: 64].

² Protrepticus, 2.18.1.

³ See Mortley, Raoul 1976. “The Mirror and 1 Cor.13,12 in the Epistemology of Clement of Alexandria”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 30: 109-12.

and distortions, and led to the mirror's association with magic. This also explains the biblical allusion to seeing "as in a mirror, obscurely": the word here is *esoptron*.¹

The point is that one could not expect to have a clear and unambiguous look at anything in or through a mirror. And indeed, the ancient mirror is equated with transforming and supernatural perception, but never with simple self-observation. There is no sense in which the mirror is thought to convey a simple and accurate image of the person before it, as we would expect it to be the case with our modern technology.² Thus, it would have been the case that the search for one's own image may have been more urgent than we would expect, as in our own culture the image of oneself is so freely available both through the technological advance of mirrors, and through that of cameras. The absence of ready access to selves in classical Greece must have been the source of a peculiar degree of angst. But it is a serious point: if you had been an ancient Greek, you would not have been able to see yourself, though the desire to do so was obviously there, given the prominence of the mirror motif in literature and the number of crude mirrors archaeologists have discovered.

This is probably in the end the meaning of the Narcissus myth, or part of it – let us not forget Echo – in that Narcissus exemplified the intense desire to view one's own image, which was universally denied to people in antiquity. Narcissus is not so much about self-absorption, but the symbolic representation of the universal human yearning to see an image of oneself, which was not a possibility. By comparison, we are now living with something new.

In some ways, Socrates' use of the mirror model is aligned with the ancient experience of mirrors in that he does not imagine for a minute that an absolutely accurate representation will be returned from the mirror, but considers that looking into the soul of another person will return to us a transforming image which may well show us to be different from the image which we expect to emerge. The mirror image will have a corrective value: just as Alcibiades was shown a mirror image of himself through the elenctic process, only to have his ignorance laid bare and shown to him, so the mirror of self-knowledge, which Plato has in mind, has a transforming and revelatory value. Thus, the interaction with the other is both revealing and corrective.

Technology stimulates philosophy, as we have seen in the above example, in that the technology of the mirror provided Socrates with the *paradeigma* with which to explain the idea of self-knowledge. But the mirror as a technology underwent prodigious development, and in the Renaissance, period transformed itself into a vehicle which provided an exact representation. Even in ancient Rome there were glass mirrors, but there was no way to regulate the thickness of the glass and there was consequently a distorting effect. The Venetians in the 16th century began to make flat planes of clear glass and in this period, there was developed the technology of coating glass with an amalgam of tin and mercury, producing a better reflectivity. Venice became a city of mirror production and mirrors from this period were expensive luxuries.

The Parisians have had a long fascination with mirrors: The Saint Gobain company, which still exists, was founded in 1665 as a result of government decision to increase the local production of mirrors, which had become a highly desirable luxury item. The finance ministry wished to make France self-sufficient in luxury goods: the first mirrors in this period were very small but as the technology developed, they became larger. The Republic of Venice at this time was the acknowledged leader in mirror technology and there were repeated attempts to import tradesmen from Venice into Paris. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, who has written a wonderful intellectual history of the technology of mirrors, quotes from a character in Stendahl:

I will have a magnificent drawing room. ... I shall have three mirrors in there, each seven feet high. I have always liked that kind of somber, magnificent decoration. "I wonder what the measurements are of the largest mirror they make at Saint-Gobain?" And the man who had just spent three-quarters of an hour thinking of taking his own life promptly climbed on to a chair to hunt in his bookshelves for the Saint Gobain mirror catalogue.

— Stendhal, *Armance*³

One point here is that mirrors had formerly been tiny, and the idea that there could be a large mirror appeared incredible at the time, and excited the desires of the bourgeoisie. The middle class

¹ I Corinthians, 13.12.

² In 2 Corinthians, 3:18. Human beings are mirrors reflecting God.

³ Stendhal 1975. *Armance*, Paris: Gallimard Folio: 26.

began to cover their walls with mirrors, because they could, and this led to a revolt on the part of the artists whose works were no longer required.¹The overwhelming example was set by King Louis 14th, who established the hall of mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. The work began in 1678, and set the tone for the whole of Paris, through it has to be said that the function of the mirrors was not self-contemplation.

The Therapy of Lacan

It is not therefore surprising that in the city of mirrors, the mirror impressed itself upon a well-known Parisian, Jacques Lacan, as an image to be explored in the psychoanalytic context. Not only did he have the classical tradition, in which he had been brought up, and which featured the mirror in both classical and biblical contexts, but he had the fruits of a technological explosion in his own city thrust upon his consciousness.² Lacan gave a paper on 17 July 1949, to the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, in Zurich “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function”. This was published in the *Revue de Psychanalyse* 4 (1949)449ff, and subsequently was taken up again in *Ecrits*. In the mirror phase, Lacan sees three stages: firstly, the child reacts as if the image presented by the mirror and observed is seen as the image of another; following this, the child will cease treating this image as an independent reality, and will no longer look for the other person behind the mirror; in the third stage, the human child recognizes this other as being his or her own image. There is here a process of identification, and a progressive assumption of the identity of the subject, of one’s own identity. Lacan compares the performance of monkeys in the same situation, and whilst their behavior resembles that of the human participant for stages one and two, the monkeys do not achieve stage three, the assumption of their own selfhood as “I”.

From *Ecrits*:

The jubilant assumption [*assumption*] of his specular image by the kind of being- still trapped in his motor impotence and nursing dependence- the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.³

In this opaque prose, Lacan focuses on the assumption of the personal “I”: but he goes on to discuss the duality of this experience, in that there are two parties: the body of the child and its image; he emphasizes the act of the imagination (relying on the derivation of the word imaginary (*imaginaire*) -in the form of an image). Thus, the imaginary of the child enables an identification between the double, the image and the body itself. Lacan places great emphasis on the duality of this experience and the inability of the child to find a distance between his own person and that of the mirror image: he links it to aggressiveness towards other children who are of the same age.

Thus, he brings into prominence the idea of the mirror stage being the most important moment in the development of the infant into a human person. He notes on the basis of evidence that the young child quickly develops the ability to recognize himself or herself in the mirror, and moves to the stage whereby the child can identify the image seen as “me”. A child at this stage of development feels helpless, but once this identification is made moves into a phase of gradual realization that dependence on others is not total. There is an “aha” moment, when the child identifies the wholeness which is the “me” and learns to recognize him/herself.

Lacan supposes there to be a feeling of helplessness in very early childhood, an idea already formulated by Freud (*Hilflosigkeit*) and the experience of the young child of between six and eighteen months is thought to be dominated by a feeling of lack of control, and an inability to deal with all kinds of sources of anxiety, frustration so on. The mirror image, eventually accepted by

¹ Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine 2001. *The Mirror: A History*, New York: Routledge: chapter 3.

² Lacan was educated at the College Stanislas, a Jesuit school, and after studying medicine and psychiatry and completing his thesis ‘De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité’, he attended Kojève’s seminar on German philosophy at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in 1939. These seminars were open to the public.

³ Lacan, J. 1901 (2006). *Ecrits*, trans. B. Fink. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc: 76.

the young child as itself, offers a stage of hope in that the assumption of the image of his/her body is thought to be connected to the thought that he or she can overcome this experience of helplessness: it is thought that here is the discovery of an integrated wholeness in the human being, a sense of the coordination of all the different parts. Lacan sees this in a sense as an illusion, since individuals spend their lives pursuing this unattainable state of harmony and control, as promised by the mirror. The image of wholeness thus presented is something of a chimera.

There is something of the myth of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* here, with the idea that human beings spend their lives pursuing that other half which complements them, and which was somehow magically separated from them at birth. Lacan would have been well aware of the idea of the fruitless pursuit of the complement, as Freud himself quoted the myth of Aristophanes,¹ and it offers a prime illustration of the idea of love as a sense of lack, or a lack of being. But here Lacan gives it his own twist: it is the mirror image which is the object of the pursuit – the perfect wholeness observed and assumed in the image of the mirror – with all its narcissistic temptation. For Lacan, there is an element of narcissism, interpreted in the Freudian tradition, in this “aha” moment of self-recognition in the mirror. So, the other half envisaged by Aristophanes, becomes the image of perfect wholeness, competence and dominance perceived at that one originary moment in the mirror phase.

Yet was Lacan well served by Saint Gobain? The excruciatingly accurate mirrors produced by their factory provides a very different visual experience, arising from a very different technology: what one sees is what one is, neither more nor less. There is no prophetic capacity lent by distortions or shadowing in the mirror itself, no looking beyond: only the real person, with the only possibility of addition or subtraction lying with the agent himself or herself, and therefore consciously assumed as an agent’s act. Preoccupation with such an image can only lead to a kind of solipsism, or narcissism which excludes all others, which seems not to be narcissism at all.

Solipsism here means neither the philosophical position which denies the existence of realities outside of one’s own mind, nor the psychological solipsism of the tendency to deny all reality except that which is within one’s own mind, but simply the tendency to focus on oneself and nothing else as a means to self-knowledge. The weakness of the mirror in the modern version of the technology is that it does not cause one to look beyond, but simply involves the study of oneself as one actually appears to one’s own eyes. One can either focus with merciless exactitude, or one can delude oneself as to the nature of the image presented, but either way, one does not go beyond the contents of one’s own mind.

Lacan and the self in the midst of others

Lacan does actually mention the Delphic exhortation, but quite dismissively:²

Kern unseres Wesen, “the core of our being” – it is not so much that Freud commands us to target this, as so many others before him have done with the futile adage “Know Thyself”, as that he asks us to reconsider the pathways that lead to it.

The gist of this passage is that Freud has affected a revolution in understanding which renders futile the attempt to define the core of our being, in the sense of delimiting it and objectifying it. Lacan seems to suggest that it is impossible to throw boundaries around the self: it is not entirely clear whether he is saying that the internal being escapes definition, or that it is so fluid and has so many facets, with whims, momentary impulses, moments of rage and so on that it is difficult to define. But he also speaks about Erasmus and the complete redefinition of the individual and his/her relationship to his fellows: this is a kind of unmooring of the self, brought about by the Reformation thinker, in that the individual is now paramount.

Through his discovery, Freud brought the border between object and being that seemed to mark the limits of science within its ambit.³

¹ See Freud, Sigmund 1905 (2000). *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie), ed. J. Strachey. New York: Basic Books: 2.

² Ibid, 437.

³ Ibid, 438.

And he goes on to speak of Heidegger's emphasis on man as in the "midst of beings", and at stake in this passage are two ideas, one being that the borders of the selfescape definition, and that one is better off thinking of pathways followed, then boundary markers, such as one puts on property; and second that humankind is in the midst of otherness, or more specifically other people. The limits which divide us from other people are at best fuzzy.

Elsewhere Lacan emphasizes the way in which seeing can create reality, in discussing experiments which had been done on pigeons: the female pigeon cannot actually give birth unless being seen by the male, and the male cannot achieve fruitfulness without being able to look at the female.¹ In this discussion Lacan has adumbrated the idea that being seen by another actually creates a reality for the individual, that is, the need to be observed may bring about some phenomenon, activity or process which otherwise would remain latent. And in the case of the pigeon experiments, the image provided by a mirror was sufficient to produce the biological effects. Of course, we are talking about a Saint Gobain mirror here – the distorting mirror of antiquity would have led to who knows what results.

This world of the other is for Lacan a world of both metaphor and metonymy,² in that a symptom described by the client is actually a metaphor for something else, and that which hides behind the metaphor is what has to be clarified. Metonymy describes desire, as opposed to a symptom: it is the active force, as opposed to the symbol of something suffered. Metonymy is generally considered to be the part for the whole (the crown for the king), so the desire for the mother, which Oedipus³ supposedly exemplifies, actually stands for a desire for a larger and wider experience. Nothing means what it appears to mean, nothing can be taken at face value, because it is either a metaphor or an example of metonymy: this is the world of the other, and the experience of being in the midst of humanity. Everything seen is a veil, and everything offered up to perception is itself a veil.

Further, there are some objects in the world which have no mirror image, and which occupy the shadowy realm of being the within, where there is no exterior or without. These kinds of things are parts or phases of the total bodily experience, such as the human gaze, the voice, and so on:

A common characteristic of these objects as I formulate them is that they have no specular image, in other words, no alterity. This is what allows them to be the "stuff", or better put the lining – without, nevertheless, being the outside of the very subject people take to be the subject of consciousness... It is to this object which cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes. A substance caught in the net of shadow, and which, robbed of its shadow swelling volume, holds out once again the tired lure of the shadow as if it were substance.⁴

There is perhaps a puzzle here in that there appears to be a play on words: Lacan uses the word 'specular' (*spéculaire*) and this of course is related originally to the Latin '*speculum*' or mirror. One wonders if he has in mind the idea of the speculative: I think so-he is hinting at the lack of a precise outline in such images. But in the end, it is clear that he is referring to a category of being which has no mirror image, but which is nevertheless very much part of the human interaction and the workings of the human psychodrama. It seems that he reserves the importance of the mirror stage for the grasp of the whole being, as subject, with all its component parts, but then, later, there is developed the idea of the fuzzy being, with no clear boundaries.

Lacan is acutely aware of the painful clarity of the Saint Gobain mirror (so to speak), and refers to it as a trap for the analyst, who might hold up a painfully clear image to the client. If the patient were to see himself or herself in the pure clear surface of the mirror provided by the analyst – if

¹ Ibid, 155.

² Ibid, 439.

³ Oedipus would be astonished at his modern transformation: his problem was ignorance, not desire, and when once he had discovered that he had inadvertently married his mother, he set out on an orgy of self-destruction. The saga of Oedipus would be best considered under the subject heading of ignorance, a subject of enormous scope within Platonism.

⁴ *Ecrits*, 693. I have used here as elsewhere Bruce Fink's 2006 translation. In it, 'etoffe' which may also mean cloth, is translated as "stuff": the guillemets in the French indicate some special idea, thus "stuff". The French *etoffe* can mean either, but the translator is right. It appears to me that Lacan has in mind the image of the cloth of which a coat is made, and is referring to the lining, "doubleure", and contrasting it with the exterior of the jacket. He is talking about a jacket which has no exterior.

they were to see their double – that would cause uncontrollable anxiety.¹ Here is the equivalent of Socrates' therapeutic effect: the bewilderment resulting from the demonstration of ignorance.

Conclusion

How then do we conclude? Plato's understanding of self-knowledge is that it comes from the perception of other people – through the mirror provided by the eye of the other person, a transforming perception, because the light from the eye of the other creates a reality. This is not so far from Lacan, for whom it is also true that seeing creates being: where Plato's idea might be based on ancient physics – the idea of the light streaming from the eye interacting with the light coming from an object – Lacan uses biological analogies to evoke the importance of being seen in order to create identity. Lacan sees self-understanding and self-interaction as being in the midst of otherness, and to some extent his writing is all about how to penetrate the veil of otherness. In this he is quite close to Heidegger, and the idea that revelation is also concealment.

Why then does he bother with the solipsistic mirror stage, of the modern Saint Gobain mirror? The true image which it shows, conveys to oneself exactly what one is physically, and nothing more or less. This appears to be anomalous given the general pattern of his thought, and he might well have done better to adhere to the Platonic idea that self-knowledge comes from the other and only from the other. For this is eventually what he says.

It must be the case that Lacan has to account for the idea of the ego or personal subject, as this had become mandatory in Western philosophy. This was not a requirement felt by Plato, for whom the idea of the ego as we know it, was absent: that is a more modern invention going back to Plotinus² and then to Saint Augustine, in the Confessions – the idea of a personal, individual subject, whose experiences and inner life was seen to be of great significance. The mirror phase is intended to account for that, a moment when the individual alone and uncontaminated by others, is able to recognise him or herself. This is not a task which fell to Plato, as he had no such job to do.

The absence of the ego in classical literature is best illustrated by the fact that the word for person in Greek, *prosopon*, denoted the face, or exterior presentation only, and the same applies to the Latin *persona*: both words also mean “mask”. The thinkers of this period felt the need to account for the soul, and other higher powers with which it might be affiliated, or to which it might be attached, but the importance of the saga of the individual subject was yet to be discovered. And ironically Lacan is very close to this because he seems to question at all points the limits of the self, and the idea of the boundary between the self and the other, or the self and the external. Plato's idea of the world soul is not far away. Lacan does not need his mirror. He adopts it only to move away from it. It is there only because it is in the tradition, but in a vastly different form, and because Paris is the city of mirrors.

REFERENCES

- Clement of Alexandria (trans. G.W. Butterworth) 1919. *Protrepticus*, London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Lacan, J. 1901 (2006). *Ecrits*, trans. B. Fink. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Melchior-Bonnet, Sabine 2001. *The Mirror: A History*, New York: Routledge.
- Mortley, Raoul 1976. “The Mirror and 1 Cor.13,12 in the Epistemology of Clement of Alexandria”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 30:109-120.
- Mortley, Raoul 2013. *Plotinus, Self and the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mortley, Raoul 2017. Analogy and Comparatism: A Response to G.E.R. Lloyd, *Fortunes of Analogy*, *Australasian Philosophical Review*, 1/17: 250-258.
- Renault, François and Tarrant, Harold 2015. *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stendhal 1975. *Armance*. Paris: Gallimard Folio.

¹ Ibid. 80.

² Mortley, Raoul 2013. *Plotinus, Self and the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.