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# Testing Anthropocentrism

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## Lacan and the Animal Imago

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Commenting on a text is like doing an analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949) is perhaps the most recognised and influential account of the initiation of human identity psychoanalysis has to offer.<sup>2</sup> Lacan provides us with a narrative about how we come into being as human, and how this particular identity secures its exceptional status in the moment of its constitution. This article is motivated by the observation that in this story charting the unique nature of *human* subject formation, Lacan invokes ethological evidence at several key points to generate his argument; furthermore, he was one of the first psychoanalytic thinkers to do so.<sup>3</sup> For at the same time as "The Mirror Stage" provides an origin story about the self-definition of human species being, Lacan draws on research investigating the role the imago plays in the processual creation of a self in chimpanzees, pigeons and locusts. This analysis focusses on the chimpanzee as a site of ethological comparison which in effect provides an animal analogue to the mirror stage phenomenon.

A central point is the fact that whilst Lacan's relationship to the animal in "The Mirror Stage" is a complex one, critical commentary on the text almost uniformly fails to address this relationship, despite the fact that every other aspect of Lacan's seminal essay has been critically sifted through and mulled over for decades. Scholars tend to simply document the animal references in their exegeses of the text, but do not theoretically engage with their actual assumptions. That is, rather than attending to Lacan's own ambivalence, criticism generally oscillates between wholesale disregard or superficial exegetical description, and tends to function with a reading that understands the figure of the animal as a confirmation of human/animal difference.<sup>4</sup> Two exceptions to this rule, the contributions of Ziser<sup>5</sup> and Buse<sup>6</sup> attend to the question of the animal within "The Mirror Stage" more thoroughly, although

both interpret Lacan's position as one of straightforward anthropocentrism, as well. Although as Elizabeth Grosz notes, his use of ethological research could very readily be read as "illustrations of the socializing effects of the internalization of the image of another of the same species on the individual," and as such, "interpreted as universalist both within and across species," and yet, such an interpretation is never critically considered.<sup>7</sup>

Arguing against this critical backdrop, which symptomatically reflects Lacan's own uncertainty regarding how to consider animal subjectivity, I propose that if one examines the fine grain of this short text, it is not clear that Lacan's position is a squarely anthropocentric one.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is not altogether clear *what* Lacan's position is, or if in fact he holds only one. As although Lacan does, in ways that are relatively unequivocal, commit to anthropocentrism in moments of the text, it is the other, less clear, moments throughout his argument that are of interest here. This article considers how and why Lacan manages, or rather, seems unable to manage, the figure of the animal within his thought. To do this, rather than follow routinely accepted interpretations, I consider long passages, different translations, and discussions from various moments across his corpus, as well as returning to the detail in the ethological sources Lacan himself references. For a careful examination of his thesis – specifically in dialogue with his sources – suggests that he is struggling with the task of fixing the human in place. Striving to generate a sense of humanness inoculated against the animal, his search for a sureness of identity shows signs of strain; Lacan's account is often unclear, contradictory, and confused. In following the different pulls of the writing, Lacan's explanation enacts the problem it attempts to describe, exposing the limits of what psychoanalysis – a discourse predicated on seeing what falls out of sight – is able to bear about its own investments in, or attachments to, particular articulations of human selfhood. The theory of the mirror stage thus presents us with a paradigmatic case study of the fate of the human in psychoanalytic thought, and the difficulty of reckoning with a figure that psychoanalysis constantly presumes, at the same time as it provides the resources to undo.

## The Chimpanzee

All sorts of things in the world behave like mirrors.<sup>9</sup>

In the very second paragraph of the Mirror Stage essay, Lacan evokes an animal subject- specifically, a chimpanzee:

Some of you may recall that this conception originated in a feature of human behaviour illuminated by a fact of comparative psychology. The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already

recognize as such his own image in a mirror. This recognition is indicated in the illuminative mimicry of the *Aha-Erlebnis*, which Köhler sees as the expression of situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence. This act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of the monkey, once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child's own body, and the persons and things around him.<sup>10</sup>

The “fact” of the psychological comparison that Lacan cites here is the very kernel of his mirror stage theory, that which conceivably sparked his imagination and spurred him to write probably his most central, and most foundational, theoretical contribution to psychoanalysis. And yet curiously, it rests upon a comparison to an animal, and is without reference aside from that to the ethologist, Wolfgang Köhler.<sup>11</sup> However, some theorists suggest that the child/chimpanzee's response to self-reflection is derived more specifically from the work of child psychologist Henri Wallon.<sup>12</sup>

Both Köhler and Wallon were influential psychologists in their own right who had written on chimpanzees and self-reflection. However, the two men drew strikingly different conclusions about their subjects. Köhler was one of the pioneers of Gestalt psychology and also the first person to apply Gestalt theories to animals. In the 1920s, Köhler conducted a series of experiments to test chimpanzees' abilities to learn, problem-solve, use tools, and employ critical thinking skills. Particularly interested in intelligent behaviour, he completed various tests with chimpanzees that would become canonical within comparative psychology.<sup>13</sup> Of specific relevance to Lacan's interests, Köhler documented the chimpanzees' reactions to their mirror images, and concluded that they could recognise their reflections, and indeed found great pleasure and fascination in them. He published his results in a six-year study entitled *The Mentality of Apes*.<sup>14</sup> Wallon was a child psychologist who, in 1931, performed what he called the “mirror test,” in which he compared the reactions of human infants and chimpanzees upon encountering their mirror reflections. When humans and chimpanzees reached approximately 6 months, Wallon contended that both could recognise the image as their own, but whilst the chimpanzees quickly become uninterested, the infant continues to be mesmerised. These findings were published in his 1934 book *Les origines du caractère chez l'enfant*, along with research pertaining to infant development, child psychology, and comparative animal studies.

Notwithstanding the uncertain provenance of Lacan's research on the chimpanzees, Lacan only references Köhler. Critics have sought to explain why a reference to Wallon goes unacknowledged in the text even though at least superficially it is Wallon rather than Köhler's conclusions that seem to

undergird Lacan's argument. For example, Lacan's biographer Elisabeth Roudinesco argues the case for explicit plagiarism – but what still remains unknown is *why* it goes unacknowledged.<sup>15</sup> Although Wallon's narrative of cross-species experiences of self-reflection certainly confirms what Lacan presents to us, I read Lacan as referencing Köhler instead of Wallon for several reasons. For one, Lacan *does* cite Köhler's name, and never Wallon's; Köhler's insight theories share much with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage; and Lacan references Köhler's notion of situational apperception and the "*Aha Erlebnis*" as significant points. Most importantly, Köhler was famous for his study on insight behaviour and chimpanzees, and is the only authority referenced in the discussion of child and chimpanzee behaviour (and his work *The Mentality of Apes*, in which he discusses chimpanzee reflection at length, had been translated into French). These are the most robust indicators that he probably was the scientific authority behind Lacan's gloss. However, if Lacan *is* referencing Köhler, given he is presenting evidence contrary to Köhler's argument, why do so? And if referencing Wallon, why not cite him? Furthermore, why, in Wallon's place, cite another scientist who completed an analogous study on chimpanzee-child behaviour on reflection whose conclusions countered Lacan's argument? These questions bear on the conclusions we can draw from Lacan's analysis here. For example, if read generously, it would remain questionable just how much Lacan's reading of Köhler gels with Köhler's own findings. If read more parsimoniously, Lacan's interpretation of Köhler would be blatantly incorrect, and his adherence to Wallon's research (and thus the likelihood of him referencing the latter's study), patently self-evident.

Given all of the above, and the profound difference in conclusions about animal behaviour between Wallon and Köhler's, the fact that critics typically read Lacan as referencing Wallon does reveal a particular interpretive bias; the question is thus why Wallon is disproportionately inferred over Köhler, and what this bias reveals.<sup>16</sup> As using Wallon would further justify a reading of "The Mirror Stage" that confirms human exceptionalism, and an interpretation that Köhler was in fact Lacan's source would challenge this reading, we can read the ambiguity in this simple citational puzzle as emblematic of Lacan's apprehension about human/animal difference, one which persists throughout the entirety of this text. Rather than conclusively resolve this difficulty, my point is instead to underscore the ambiguity here, and to emphasise the fact that we don't, in fact, quite know.

To return to our analysis of this passage: in the following sentence, Lacan uses the "*Aha-Erlebnis*" expression, referring to a term coined by twentieth century German Gestalt psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler; a German phrase whose literal translation is "aha-experience".<sup>17</sup> What Bühler intended by this concept was akin to an epiphany, or to put it in his own words, "a eureka" moment.<sup>18</sup> Otherwise put, it names an experience or insight that reveals itself suddenly: for example, a solution to a problem that has up

until that point remained unsolved, or even entirely unrecognised. Lacan emphasises the monumental significance of the jubilation evidenced by the human infant that is lacking in the chimpanzee: it signifies *recognition*. The “*Aha-Erlebnis*” and Köhler’s concept of insight learning, another school of psychological thought he founded, suggests that these moments of recognition are informed, conscious, and the outcome of critical thinking and reflection; directly opposed to an unthinking, instinctual, learned or imitative response. Thus when Lacan stipulates that the infant’s behaviour in front of the mirror is seen by Köhler to be an indication of “situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence,” he is inferring that the infant’s behaviour speaks of a primordial intelligence, an ability to thoughtfully apprehend its world, and one that he considers meaningful.<sup>19</sup> Whilst Lacan refers to “this feature of human behaviour,” his formulation is ambiguous. Interpretation is open to two potentially contradictory points, namely, that nonhumans can exhibit similar behaviour, or, that he reserves the mirror stage for the human.<sup>20</sup> Although content to concede that the infant is developmentally delayed in comparison to the chimpanzee in relation to instrumental intelligence, Lacan simultaneously implies that the child *will* eventually intellectually surpass the chimpanzee. Curiously, this fact is implicit but always read *as if* stated explicitly. And yet, the former allows for a far more open interpretation.

In this typically Lacanian seven-line sentence he explains that, in direct contrast to the child who is “far from exhausting itself,” the monkey “exhaust[s] itself ... once the image has been mastered and found empty”.<sup>21</sup> What, though, does it mean to find an image “empty,” and why is it that, given the openness of this question, Lacan and his critics have overwhelmingly neglected to explain or entertain it?<sup>22</sup> Similarly, what does this emptiness entail such that it would produce a response of exhaustion – put otherwise, what does it mean to exhaust oneself in confrontation with one’s reflection? To ponder these questions, it is worth briefly returning to the original French, in which the term *inanité* is used. With its obvious closeness to the English “inanity,” this word does not literally translate to “empty” but rather is closer to the meaning evoked by the English word “pointless.” There is a significant difference between the chimpanzee finding her reflection empty, void or hollow, and considering it pointless. Interestingly, one interpretation might assume this difference in translation moves from a lack of intelligence or psyche in the chimpanzee to its clear presence, however this seems far too simple. While certainly different, whether the chimpanzee found her reflection to be empty or to be pointless, both are conceptually evocative responses, and neither reading forecloses the possibility of self-recognition.

In a ten-line sentence in “The Freudian Thing,” Lacan again discusses the chimpanzee in front of the mirror with reference to the question of

intelligence.<sup>23</sup> A similar pattern of ambivalence regarding human/animal difference, and the key role of intelligence in self-recognition, is evident:

This is a point that I think I have myself helped to elucidate by conceiving the dynamics of the so-called *mirror stage* as a consequence of a prematuration at birth, generic to man, from which results at the time indicated the jubilant identification of the as yet *infans* individual with the total form in which this reflexion of the nose is integrated, namely, the image of his body: an operation which by being performed at a glance (*à vue de nez*), is of much the same kind as the “aha!” that reveals to us the intelligence of the chimpanzee (we never fail to be amazed when confronted by the miracle of intelligence on the faces of our peers), does not fail to bring with it deplorable consequences.<sup>24</sup>

Here too, we cannot arrive at a sure conclusion about Lacan’s position. Illustrating human/animal likeness, Lacan refers to the chimpanzee as one of “our peers,” and argues that the experience of the baby in front of the mirror “is of much the same kind” as the chimpanzee, and similarly acknowledges the intelligence of chimpanzees.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Lacan’s assumption that the mirror reveals the animal’s intelligence to us perhaps also suggests that it was not clear or known to us beforehand. What is interesting is that his phrasing “generic to man” could be interpreted as a reference to the human-specific nature of the mirror stage, or the human-specific nature of the human’s “prematuration at birth,” which he mentions on several occasions.<sup>26</sup>

Yet if we consider Bruce Fink’s translation in the first complete English edition of the *Écrits*, Lacan states that the chimpanzee exhausts itself “in eventually acquired control over the uselessness of the image”.<sup>27</sup> Could it be that Lacan reads the chimpanzee as recognising, but not misrecognising (as the human baby does) her image, and thus dismissing it as useless – as going through a psychical process of self-recognition and awareness that is not followed by the “deplorable consequences” of alienation?<sup>28</sup> The choice of “uselessness” perhaps introduces a sense of utility, and one that differs again in meaning and theoretical consequence from emptiness and pointlessness. This translational dissonance is clearer still in Lacan’s presentation “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis” published in 1948, a year before “The Mirror Stage.” It is worth quoting a passage from the 1948 text in full in order to highlight this consistent ambiguity in understanding exactly how the chimpanzee engages with its image, and in turn how Lacan understands, and narrates, this engagement:

But what demonstrates the phenomenon of recognition, implying subjectivity, are the signs of triumphant jubilation and the playful self-discovery that characterize the child’s encounter with his mirror image starting in the sixth month. This behavior contrasts sharply with the indifference shown by the very animals that perceive this image – the chimpanzee, for example – once they have tested its vanity as an object;

and it is even more noteworthy as it occurs at an age when the child lags behind the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, only catching up with the latter at eleven months of age.<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, we are given still another interpretation of how the chimpanzee encounters its image; in this case, it responds with indifference. Tellingly, this is the same passage (and the first time) in which Lacan expressly states that recognition (whether specular or otherwise is not specified) implies subjectivity. This is also the first instance in which Lacan refers to the chimpanzee having an affective response to her image: “indifference” implies a value judgement made and felt in order to dismiss the image as no more than an object.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly however, “indifference” potentially entails an acknowledgement and comprehension of the subject in question in order to express disinterest, or to dismiss it.<sup>31</sup> Simultaneously, this description jars with the prior three in its description of the chimpanzee’s relationship with the image as characterised in part by vanity, in contrast to “emptiness” or “uselessness.” Furthermore, testing the mirror’s vanity as an object implies utility (the utility of vanity?), a meaning quite different to emptiness, uselessness and indifference.

One would assume vanity, especially that pertaining to one’s mirror image, would require a sense of self, of aesthetics, of psychical complexity, perhaps even of art. To this end, wouldn’t one assume that the psychical architecture put into place by one’s experience of the mirror stage, especially that relationship between the I and the Ideal-I that it inaugurates, is necessary to understand and thus experience what it might mean to be vain, or narcissistic; perhaps something Lacan would concede? Given the fact that a subject’s response to the mirror to “test its vanity” could equally be used to argue that they possess, rather than lack, self-recognition, this problem raises the question of why this passage gets interpreted in only one way (the latter), adding further evidence to the thematic blind spot regarding the human exclusivity of self-recognition in readings of the text.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, what Lacan does clearly state in this passage is that “animals ... perceive this image,” providing the chimpanzee as one example.<sup>33</sup> That is, the passage maintains that indifference is expressed after the chimpanzees have perceived their reflection, and explored their vanity with the mirror. The passage does not state that the chimpanzees *lack interest* in their reflections, but rather suggests that their interest is limited to vanity. Is it possible that, rather than a wholesale denial of recognition or selfhood to animals, that Lacan is accounting for a difference in desire and affect: the child displays jubilation, the chimpanzee, vanity? Why should it be that the former connotes self-discovery and the latter, its absence? For instance, surely the presentation of indifference to one’s image could illustrate *both* self-recognition *and* lack of interest in one’s reflection. Moreover, one could assume that Köhler’s research suggests that chimpanzees have not “seen” (themselves, or more generally) prior to his provision of a mirror. This



perhaps implies that self-recognition in animals could only occur after human intervention. However, at the same time one could assume that Köhler's research does not suggest that the animals were incapable before the provision of a mirror, but rather that after this particular interaction the chimpanzees fundamentally changed the way they acted.

It is not possible for either response to guarantee the presence or absence of self-recognition, and all that it entails for Lacan's argument. Read generously then, we can assume that Lacan is simply illustrating the presence of a difference in affect, or broadly, in response, between species upon encountering their reflections. Interestingly, if human babies respond to their mirror image by crying or grimacing, this indicates a problematic trajectory for the psychological development of that infant.<sup>34</sup> But significantly, it is never suggested that this "negative" affective response indicates an inferior intelligence, a lack of self-recognition, or a primitive mode of perception or psychological capacity. These different, and contradictory iterations of the same moment suggest that Lacan is faltering, putting his ambivalence, or what appears to be his confusion, on display. What is noteworthy here is that even as Lacan stutters, all of his textual accounts, even with his shifting terminology, are quite open. Resisting the desire to decide, and preserving this openness, I turn to another iteration of his argument.

The human-chimpanzee comparison is again discussed in "Presentation on Psychological Causality," by which point we have a firmer understanding of the meaning of Lacan's reference in "The Mirror Stage," as well as further examples of this running theoretical inconsistency in his efforts to describe (or perhaps prescribe?) the chimpanzee's response to its reflection.<sup>35</sup>

This behavior is none other than that of the human infant before its image in the mirror starting at the age of six months, which is so strikingly different from the behavior of a chimpanzee, whose development in the instrumental application of intelligence the infant is far from having reached. What I have called the triumphant assumption [*assumption*] of the image with the jubilatory mimicry that accompanies it and the playful indulgence in controlling the specular identification, after the briefest experimental verification of the nonexistence of the image behind the mirror, in contrast with the opposite phenomena in the monkey – these seemed to me to manifest one of the facts of identificatory capture by the imago that I was seeking to isolate. It was very directly related to the image of the human being that I had already encountered in the earliest organization of human knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

In *this* explication, the possibility of self-awareness again turns on a shift in affect (between jubilation – the human baby – and its apparent opposite – the chimpanzee) but not in any straightforward way. That is, whilst Lacan

explicitly elaborates a clear bifurcation in response between human and chimpanzee, he does not impart a value judgement to this difference; what he does do, however, is exploit this difference in order to carve out an expressly unique space for the human. If we divide the passage in two, the ambiguity of the second sentence enables different readings: one could query whether the chimpanzee's distinct response definitively concludes that it does not assume its image, and thus experience a mirror stage of sorts.

Further, consistent in his conceptual ambiguities, Lacan again introduces something he does not mention in other descriptions of this moment – that “after the briefest experimental verifications” the infant confirms that there is not an image “behind the mirror”.<sup>37</sup> This comment is typically interpreted to suggest that the infant furtively checks to see that there is nothing behind the mirror: he expects for example, another baby that he is in fact looking at rather than himself.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Lacan's commentators claim that the infant realises that there is no other baby “in” or “behind” the mirror, however the chimpanzee doesn't, and instead believes for a time that it is looking at another chimpanzee. This is one area where Lacan appears to cite Köhler correctly: Köhler's work with chimpanzees detailed that they did, for a time, check behind the (hand) mirror as if expecting there to be another chimpanzee. They soon realise that they are looking at themselves, however, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. What is curious is the question of how the human infant would be able to check to ensure there was not another child behind, within or beyond the mirror “sunk in his motor incapacity” as he is.<sup>39</sup> Whether Lacan literally means that the infant has some means of looking physically behind the mirror, as with a hand-held mirror or a hanging small mirror in a cot, is unclear. However, surely the baby's lolling back and forth, pressing up against the mirror, and constant fascination with the tactile sensation of the mirror could be interpreted as a means of “checking” the validity of this image, even if not physically capable of a more rigorous examination. Testing its peripheries, pressing up against it, gazing up and around at its edges, noting the difference between mirror and carpet, or mirror and wall, this investigative desire certainly seems to be in evidence as much as is physiologically possible, even if simply executed, in the babies' visual engagement with the mirror.<sup>40</sup> On this point however, given that the chimpanzee behaves in the same manner, the use of this point as a point of difference does not hold, instead only obscuring the directional clarity of Lacan's thought.

For instance, whilst Lacan informs us that the chimpanzee is at this point smarter than the infant, he does not tell us why, or how, this is, just that it is; nor how the infant, from this cognitively inferior state, can “nevertheless” apprehend something that the chimpanzee cannot.<sup>41</sup> That is, despite the fact that he lacks access to the minds of both, he infers the apparent difference of their mental states from their behaviours. However, given that both the animal and the human behave similarly, are allegedly cognitively lacking and

unable to articulate their world in his terms, and thus in a way *are* symmetrically positioned, how *would* Lacan diagnose one as intelligent and one as intellectually lacking? Furthermore, even if behaviourally analogous, whether the chimpanzee comprehends what the human does remains a question, and thus, so too does its equivalent: whether the infant comprehends what the chimpanzee comprehends, or indeed, anything at all. But it is precisely this difference that concerns us, as Lacan's formula, albeit provisionally perhaps, appears to presume an answer. For if we follow his argument very generally, we could conclude that the baby perceives the mirror image of the human, whereas the chimpanzee apparently perceives emptiness. Yet as the chimpanzee is cognitively advanced, could Lacan be arguing that the chimpanzee either never perceived anything, or perhaps once perceived something, but now no longer does; or, no longer cares about what it initially perceived? Similarly, it follows that if the chimpanzee is cognitively advanced, and the mirror stage is an act of intellection and comprehension (again, both positions Lacan is wedded to), we could deduce that there may be something about the disinterest in one's image or lack of self-recognition that is in fact symptomatic of intelligence. Indeed, assuming that the chimpanzee and the infant *do* behave in manners that are "strikingly different," it is not clear why this difference should in fact hold any evaluative weight.<sup>42</sup> And whilst Lacan does not appear to advance a moral judgement based upon this difference in species response, he nevertheless stresses this difference in each rendition of the mirror stage, which implies that it must carry some consequence for his argument. Here again, we see Lacan's habit of comparing the chimpanzee to the infant in order to initially confirm some sense of equivalence, only to reverse his decision, and use the same piece of evidence to confirm difference. This repetition adds sticking points within the text, increasing the number of conflicting moments that punctuate his narrative with uncertainty and indecision.

Whilst the animal is oriented to incapacity and the human to capacity, the inherent openness for alternative interpretations of the text is significant. Given the complexities and questions that we've found within Lacan's research, and that the evidence he presents *is* quite open and abstruse, it is instructive that he narrates this claim as if self-evident, as if monosemous. For instance, although many claim that he upholds the centrality of the human intellect over its duller nonhuman counterpart, such an argument does not permit us to consider certain questions that Lacan may have himself been musing over.<sup>43</sup> Simply put: why would the human infant's reaction to its reflection be the benchmark for inquisitive self-awareness? Why would there be only one expression or reaction which demonstrates an awareness of self? Presumably the expression of jubilation would not manifest identically across species, and the chimpanzee would not have to mime the human infant in order for its response to be meaningful. What seems to be implicit in Lacan's omission and his deductions is a sense, even if hesitant, that the human infant's response is the "correct," or at best, the meaningful one in regard to

the measure of intelligence. Certainly, this is the assumption made by his interpreters. However, why this is so proceeds unelaborated, as if a certain unproblematic faith in anthropocentrism can stand in for the provision of an answer or explanation.

Indeed, given that the length of time in front of the mirror is taken as an indicator of intelligent self-perception, one possible reading is that the chimpanzee is of superior intelligence, as evidenced by its ability to recognise its reflection in a shorter period of time than the human. To press this point further: Lacan confirms that the chimpanzee found its mirror image “empty”.<sup>44</sup> But given Lacan’s commitments, wouldn’t the very concept of the mirror phase complicate the notion of reflection such that one could not speak in terms of an image or self-reflection ever “simply” being “just” an image?

Lastly, if we pause and consider Lacan’s intimation that the chimpanzee *is* of superior intelligence, shouldn’t this imply that her self-reflection is potentially more pregnant with possibility than that which is currently available to the infant? The fact that the chimpanzee is uninterested in her reflection does not prove that she fails to comprehend this moment’s enormity; rather, it opens up the question of why she responds to her reflection with apparent impassivity, and forces us to consider the myriad reasons that may explain such a response. In other words, whilst Lacan’s ellipses are freighted and his preferential interpretations revelatory, could it be that he does not entertain this possibility in his argument in order to deflect attention away from something that may undermine his thesis? Given that Lacan repeatedly informs us that the infant is intellectually behind the chimpanzee, it must not be the infant’s intelligence that enables it to participate in the mirror stage – as Lacan could presumably still argue that it is what is specific to the human which, even in this primordial state, is superior, precisely as it is not instrumental. In other words, the natural superiority of the human requires no argument. This impasse naturally provokes the question: if it *is* Lacan’s aim to argue that the infant has an advantage over the animal – the disproportionately intelligent animal – if not intellect, what *is* securing this advantage? And is there something in this dyadic relationship of advantage and disadvantage, cognitive acuity and cognitive lacking, psychical capacity and psychical deficiency, that might carry or conceal a particular ideological commitment in its undertow?

## §

A brief examination of four different iterations of Lacan’s argument shows that the implications are not self-evident; rather, we have is four different renditions of the same event. They show that Lacan is unclear on exactly how to evaluate the chimpanzee’s reaction, and that the apparent proximity between human and animal, what any difference may mean, and whether the chimpanzee in fact experiences a mirror stage, are issues whose answers are

hard to guarantee. As if unable to manage these incongruities, echoing Lacan perhaps, these points are glossed over by his critics and instead narrated in a straightforward manner, as though the puzzle he presents us with can be sanitised and hygienically straightened out. Although his comments about the human animal distinction and the question of intelligence and psychical capacity remain open, they are consistently read as incontrovertible evidence of the human's overall lead; a generous interpretation that would read animal agency and subjectivity into Lacan's text is never seriously entertained.

In order to better understand Lacan's convoluted reasoning, we now turn to the work of Wolfgang Köhler, the psychologist whom Lacan cites in his discussion of the chimpanzee. It is necessary to examine Köhler's incredible research regarding chimpanzee self-reflection, and the uncanny resonances with, and deviations from, this evidence that Lacan admits. Throughout his 1925 classic, *The Mentality of Apes*, Köhler details a range of experiments relevant to self-realisation and recognition. However I will focus on the specific examples that detail the relationship between chimpanzees and their specular images.<sup>45</sup> In discussing presenting a small hand mirror to the chimpanzees, Köhler describes the following scene:

It has been recounted that some monkeys, dogs, cats, and even birds, when faced by their own reflections in a mirror, react – even if only momentarily – as though a real individual of the same species stood before them. When we gave the chimpanzees a hand-mirror for the first time, they looked into it and at once became intensely interested. Each one wanted to look, and tore the wonderful object out of the other's hand; and I was only able to observe methods of proceeding with both mirror and the picture behind it, when eventually Rana captured the hand-glass and escaped with it to a remote corner of the roof. She gazed long and intently into the mirror, looked up and then down, put it to her face and licked it once, stared into it again, and suddenly her free hand rose and grasped – as though at a body behind the mirror. But as she grasped emptiness she dropped the mirror sideways in her astonishment. Then she lifted it again, stared fixedly at the other ape, and again was misled into grasping into empty space.<sup>46</sup>

The exercise is, then, a veritable obsession from which they fail to tire (so much so that Köhler had to stop his mirror studies as the chimpanzees would steal the hand mirrors he used); we can recall the slightly obscure wording Lacan employs during his discussion of chimpanzees and the mirror image: "once the image has been mastered and found empty".<sup>47</sup> Arguably this refers to the process through which the chimpanzee comprehends the mirror, as reflection alone, and realises the emptiness of the image; empty, because the mirror does not conceal anything "behind" it, does not contain or portray another animal, but only reflects.<sup>48</sup> Certainly then, this passage provides the source evidence for some elements of Lacan's argument concerning the chimpanzee, however what he recounts and what he excludes from Köhler's

account is significant. Although Köhler mentions that the chimpanzees try to find “the other ape,” which is consonant with Lacan’s interpretation, Lacan simultaneously fails to mention Köhler’s insistence on the chimpanzee’s obvious and ongoing fascination with the mirror.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, that “each one wanted to look” and that the chimpanzees “looked into it and at once became intensely interested,” not to mention Rana who “gazed long and intently” at her image, is not elaborated in the illustration Lacan provides.<sup>50</sup> Rather, it is directly contradicted.

Further, Köhler’s recounting of Rana’s behaviour is eerily reminiscent of Lacan’s description of the human infant in front of the mirror. Staring enraptured, observing it from different angles, moving her face up against it, licking it, and trying to grasp its meaning – this *is* the behaviour that human infants express in filmed depictions of the mirror stage. In the following paragraph Köhler informs us that, hardly unmoved, the group’s captivation by the mirror “did not decrease ... but remained so strong that the playing with reflecting surfaces became one of the most popular and permanent of their ‘fashions,’” such that the small hand-glass provoked a contagious enchantment throughout the group of chimpanzees.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Köhler notes that the chimpanzees quickly discarded the mirror as they discovered the reflecting propensity of various objects: “having once had their attention drawn to it, they mirrored themselves in anything at all available for the purpose: in bright pieces of tin, in polished potsherds, in tiny glass splinters, for which their hands provided the background, and, above all, in pools of water”.<sup>52</sup> One cannot help but recall the myth of Narcissus here, especially in light of the fact that it inspired the naming of the psychological constitution that Freud first postulated, which in turn inspired Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage.<sup>53</sup>

In Köhler’s recounting of Tschecho’s behaviour we come across another description that is startlingly similar to Lacan’s picture of the jubilant human infant. It provides him with opportunity to draw behavioural, and possibly, psychological, parallels between human and animal responses to self-reflection:

I have often observed Tschecho for long at a time sunk in contemplation of her own reflection in a pool. She played with it: bent far over it and drew back slowly, shook her head backwards and forwards, and made all kinds of grimaces over and over again. Finally, she dipped her great hand into the puddle, shaking and wagging her head, and let the water trickle back onto the picture in the water.<sup>54</sup>

Köhler states that the chimpanzees were “constantly looking at themselves,” finding objects for this purpose “which we humans would never have thought of”.<sup>55</sup> So enthralled were the chimpanzees by the enigma of reflection that as soon as their urine pooled on the cement floor of their cages they were discovered “bending sideways, with eyes fixed on the liquid,” moving their

heads “slowly to and fro in order to catch the reflection of objects from outside the window.”<sup>56</sup>

Contra Lacan’s comment regarding the chimpanzee’s eventual disinterest, Köhler took this ongoing behaviour as proof of “how absorbing was the phenomenon of reflection to them”.<sup>57</sup> This is instructive for our purposes here, as the chimpanzees are re-cognising things that had been in their everyday worlds (reflective surfaces like tin, urine, glass) as enticing and beguiling, though they were once ubiquitous and ordinary. Alongside a new-found obsession with their own image, this psychical process *is* the nature of the recognition Lacan contends that the mirror stage calls forth.

More so, Köhler conducts another stimulating experiment that concerns self-awareness with the chimpanzees by presenting them with photographs of themselves. These photographs were “examined with great attention,” and treated in a similar way to the mirror.<sup>58</sup> Collectively coveted, inspected, gazed at and mulled over, the chimpanzees again tried to interrogate the reverse side of the photographs. Köhler documents one particularly curious response, from a chimpanzee named Sultan. Upon seeing his own portrait, Sultan “suddenly raised his arm and stretched out his hand towards the picture, in the specific gesture of friendly greeting...palm inward.”<sup>59</sup> Sultan performs this ritual “wave” whenever the photograph is turned to face him, with “gaze fixed on the photograph,” though stops immediately when he is shown its opposite blank face.<sup>60</sup> Köhler informs us that Sultan only uses this particular gesture for greeting humans or other animals, and never inanimate objects. Earlier in the text, he describes this same greeting as beholding a “special emotional value ... a special character,” and elsewhere discusses the role of mutual hand clasping in chimpanzee behaviour as not specific to greetings as such but rather proper to the “spontaneous expression of joy and sympathy on special occasions.”<sup>61</sup>

This is surely a compelling scene, another in which the community of chimpanzees do not simply utilise as a tool nor dismiss an object embodying their image, but become preoccupied by something in it that they recognise, or identify (with). Whether this is an example of self-awareness, the assumption that there is another, individual, chimpanzee, or something entirely different, allows us to suggest that there is something *meaningful* about these personal photographs for the chimpanzees. At minimum, we could simply understand these facts collectively as instances that insinuate complexity inhering within the relationships chimpanzees have with their image – whether that of their own, or their species. Additionally, the gesture of greeting, the “wave” by which Sultan salutes his own photograph, recalls something of the same gesture that human babies and toddlers routinely enact during their ecstatic moments in front of the mirror, seeming to embody a kind of interpellative “Hey, You!” that is taking place between the I and its specular double. Independent of how it is interpreted, this is an interested, inquisitive response from the chimpanzees, and serves as another point of

comparison between the human infant's exuberance and the enthrallment of its closest hominid. It is therefore all the more significant that this account is absent from Lacan's discussion, prompting the question of why this particularly relevant material should be absent, and what this absence signifies and enables.

In a telling statement, Köhler concludes, "What strange beings are the chimpanzees, to be *permanently attracted by the contemplation* of such phenomena, which can bring them not the least tangible or 'practical' benefit."<sup>62</sup> In contrast to Lacan who insists that the chimpanzees utilise the discovery of reflection as a simple tool, Köhler seems to imply that the paradox of the mirror for the chimpanzees and the fascination it accords is *not* of a practical or instrumental value. To Köhler, it serves a purpose that is contemplative, perhaps intellectual, certainly affective, even quite possibly, metaphysical. Again here, even if generously read, none of the terms Lacan employs – emptiness, exhaustion, utility, uninterest – remotely align with the richly textured intersubjective, social and psychical world that Köhler unfolds for us. Distinct terms with distinct meanings, the terms Lacan offers all differ considerably amongst themselves, as well as deviating generally from Köhler's evidence. To ameliorate Lacan's comparison here, one would have to differently configure this point such that we might use this apparent difference in interpretation as an opportunity to open up the meanings of concepts like contemplation or metaphysics, and emptiness and utility, to question if their juxtaposition is necessarily self-evident. Nevertheless, Köhler's research presents evidence that suggests a comparative case would be possible between chimpanzee and human rather than a contrasting one; why is it then that Lacan reads difference where Köhler sees likeness? And at what scholarly cost is Lacan able to maintain this omission?

This question is even more laden considering the nature of the intervention Köhler seeks to make in his text. The context in which Köhler was writing was dominated by a dismissal of the notion of nonhuman intelligence.<sup>63</sup> The theories of American psychologist Edward L. Thorndike and German psychologist Oskar Pfungst came to prominence and dominated the debate in animal research in the 1920s and 1930s, a debate that was tentatively posing questions about the possibility of a nonhuman mind. Both Thorndike and Pfungst conducted comparative psychological research with a range of animals and, by and large, concluded that animals lacked cognitive ability, and learnt simply through accidental success (coincidence) and imitation. The effect was to question their capacity to learn with intention. Their work was highly influential, and psychologists interested in learning processes aimed to prove that animal behaviour could be understood simply with reference to either of these readings. It was in direct response to Thorndike's thesis and its hegemonic acceptance at that time that Köhler set out to research chimpanzees, inspired to find out "whether [animals] do not behave with intelligence and insight under conditions which require such



behaviour,” conducting most of his research on the process of learning and problem solving.<sup>64</sup>

Köhler devised a range of experiments which all required problem solving in order to uncover a key to a puzzle. Germane to Lacan’s interests, most of these had an explicit focus on the importance and role of vision in perception and learning. His studies had several key findings. He claimed that chimpanzee behaviour was never random but always sensible from a particular perspective: the “errors” the simians made were similarly not random or without reason but instead meaningful. Perhaps most importantly, chimpanzees did not overcome the obstacle of their experiment by means of trial and error learning, but instead through insight.<sup>65</sup> In fact, Köhler classified the chimpanzee’s errors into three categories, one of which he referred to as “Good errors.”<sup>66</sup> “In these,” he states, “the animal does not make a stupid, but rather an almost favourable impression.”<sup>67</sup> Instead of reading their lapses in “reason” as straightforwardly indicative of an inherent vacuity (as did colleagues such as Thorndike), here Köhler acknowledges the generativity of error and the productive potential of apparent “mistakes.” Furthermore, he demonstrates his own openness to the complexity of animal behaviour, in place of an investment in finding and diagnosing stupidity too readily. Contrary to Thorndikean logic, then, during his simple experiments, he noticed that after the obstacle was realised, the chimpanzees would pause, mull, and after some time, and at an ostensibly arbitrary moment, suddenly approach the puzzle and immediately solve it without hesitation. In the case of gaining access to a food item that required the use of objects arranged in new ways, the animals would fail continuously for some time. Then suddenly, they would purposefully use the object or arrange the tools in the correct way in order to get the food, as if the realisation had emerged from nowhere. Having understood the riddle, thought it through, and then realised the answer, the chimpanzees would master Köhler’s problems with a few quick steps which he describes as “unwaveringly purposeful.”<sup>68</sup> This led him to define his concept of insight learning as a relationship or fact that had otherwise gone unacknowledged. It involves the sudden emergence into perception and consciousness, as if by a sudden cognitive leap or the thunderclap of a pattern of points that abruptly align to make something unseen visible. Distinct from direct observation or the observation of the actions of someone else, and in contrast with trial and error as a methodology to problem solve, learning due to insight requires cognition and forethought. Providing the criterion to discriminate a thought-out solution from a chance discovery, insight learning is a cognitive experience, one that demands that the subject visualise, or contemplate, the complexity of the problem and solution internally before initiating a behavioural response. Furthermore, insight learning engenders a permanent change as the arrival of insight brings with it a realisation that remains, and can be repeated in the future. The implication is that the chimpanzees were genuinely learning.

Importantly, Köhler's application of insight learning to chimpanzees confirmed that he read their behaviour in terms of responses – considered, thoughtful, and full of intent. His main intervention was the theory that chimpanzees *are* able to act intelligently, and that expressions of *apparent* intelligence were not simply due to chance. He was specifically putting forward a notion of chimpanzees as subjects who can respond, not only react. Indeed, his entire book is full of moments describing the chimpanzees reflecting, contemplating, perceiving, being self-aware and social, emotionally sophisticated animals; in fact, his reflection on their affective complexity is a discernible theme throughout the text. What Köhler's work demonstrates is that if there is a dividing line segregating the human mind from that of the chimpanzee, it is not absolute. Reading Lacan's interpretations against Köhler's open and progressive text, along with the fact that Lacan should cite his specific research – certainly make Lacan's interpretations seem all the more conscious, decisive, and instructive.

### §

In examining Köhler's work in some detail, we discover that, instead of elucidating the meaning of the animal-human comparison in Lacan, it only confounds his argument further still. Charitably read, the one point that resounds within Lacan, and withstands his self-contradictions and narrative missteps, is that the chimpanzee and the human act differently. When we turn to Köhler, however, we find overwhelming evidence to the contrary. More so, it is no mere difference between Köhler's findings and Lacan's description of them but a categorical contradiction. That Lacan's description contravenes Köhler's evidence (which is the theoretical fulcrum of his essay) raises pertinent questions concerning Lacan's position that the mirror phase is human specific.

For instance, why cite Köhler, or cite him in place of Wallon? Why omit, or misrepresent, vital information from his research? Given that a reference to Wallon would have provided evidence for the theory that humans and chimpanzees do respond differently – and furthermore, that this point confirms human exceptionalism – the fact that he instead employs Köhler, whose research evinces the opposite and was progressive even in Lacan's time, complicates an already intricately dense puzzle. A notable motif is that when Lacan comes across commonality – for instance, between reactions to mirror images across species – his response is to segregate. In order to write the story of the subject formation not only of human individuals but of human species being, he must choose a departure point which requires the construction of a "before" from a position he perceives as the "after." His particular configuration positions the human as that which arrives, and renders the "before" of the human, (and thus, the before of culture, language and mind), the nonhuman world. Acting as the tane in his argument, the

animal must pre-exist in order for the human to come into existence. However, as explained, under any close examination or scrutiny this narrative easily dissolves: at one moment, the animal is distinct from the human, in another they co-exist on a continuum of subject formation. Once the species barrier Lacan struggles to maintain is reconsidered, these distinctions tremble under the slightest interrogation. Furthermore, whilst animals reoccur throughout Lacan's oeuvre (elephants, sticklebacks, bees), when formulating his initial theory of the mirror stage in the 1930s and 40s, the scientific study of animal behaviour was only emerging, and was entirely ignored by psychologists who rigorously defended an immutable break between the human and the animal.<sup>69</sup> Although ethology and comparisons with animal behaviour would eventually enter into psychological discussion, Lacan forecast this turn. His anticipation perhaps provides one insight into why his 1949 presentation of "The Mirror Stage" was initially met with an apathetic response.<sup>70</sup> Otherwise put: if it was not simply unnecessary, but unconventional to the point of potentially inviting critique, why should Lacan use ethological research in his paper at all – let alone use it only to dismiss its findings? Functioning like a retraction, Lacan concedes Köhler's findings, but not his conclusions; Lacan cites his research, yet only in the most impoverished way.

Since what matters is what one reconstructs of a narrative, we might question not how, but *why* Lacan arrived at the conclusion he did; why did he shape this new ethological research into the particular story that he told? Because, if we consider the lapses and incongruities in his engagement with the chimpanzee, what we encounter as a persistent motif is a wavering position, a lack of theoretical consonance, and a reoccurring ambiguity that is in evidence in the pattern these moments in the text eventually form. One point is certain: Lacan's retelling of the chimpanzee-human comparison fails to adhere to either pole – that the chimpanzee may similarly experience some form of a mirror stage, or whether this is exceptional to the human – in interpretation. He neither commits to a radical anti-anthropocentrism (as does Köhler), nor to a wholesale dismissal of animal agency and the confirmation of human uniqueness (like that of Wallon).<sup>71</sup>

It is surely a strange gesture to effectively foreclose the question that is being asked, and then, in turn to reject the empirical material relevant to this very question. How then do we make sense of Lacan's amnesia, and render intelligible what we might call the "symptoms" that materialise in our investigation? Certainly, Lacan's inconsistencies suggest the presence of a struggle with thinking species difference; it suggests his own conflictedness, along with an inability to decide *how* to place the human in relationship to the animal. Simultaneously, it could be that Lacan could not, or would not, confront an accurate entertaining of Köhler's scholarship given it holds the potential to alter the trajectory of his entire argument. Lacan's theory exhibits an uncertainty that manifests in the ambiguous position he holds regarding

the exact nature of human/animal self-recognition. I read this as being symptomatic of an ambivalence in how to think the identity of the human more broadly. Psychoanalytically speaking, it is somewhat predictable that this ambivalence should play itself out in the very essay whose aim is to justify a sense of human exceptionalism, and is routinely taken up as confirming this position uncritically.

### §

Is what thinks in my place, then, another I?<sup>72</sup>

Who, then, is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me?<sup>73</sup>

This article has argued that in “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan evinces significant ambivalence regarding the question of human specificity, and of nonhuman agency. In turn, he leaves the psychological concept of the mirror stage open to multiple interpretations and revisions. Attending to Lacan’s ambivalence in the text gives us a new way to approach this classical material, one that differs from traditional interpretations as the evidence that Lacan uses does not support the conventional interpretation of his position. What is of interest to this argument is that he consistently provides evidence for a reading of “The Mirror Stage” that cannot render its meaning straightforwardly human-specific; and therefore, anthropocentric. His persistent inability to know where, or perhaps how, to ontologically place the animal undulates through the text like an unconscious pulse. These facts, along with the blind spots, contradictions, and ambiguities we have identified in “The Mirror Stage” form an impasse that demonstrates that it is not necessarily clear what Lacan’s position on animal subjectivity is. If we accept the ethological disruptions to Lacan’s project of defining the human, perhaps the key investment shifts from diagnosing Lacan’s commitment to likeness or difference between human and animal self-reflection to confirming Lacan’s failure to create a meaningful divide between humans and the natural world. This inability to maintain a boundary in the very attempt to do precisely this is productive, as Lacan provides us with a model of anthropocentrism that always undermines itself in its efforts of self-constitution. After all, Lacan’s wavering line on the question of animal subjectivity is not surprising; it would seem as if the very integrity and specificity of human identity is what is at stake here.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, trans. John Forrester and ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 73.
- <sup>2</sup> From here on in I will use the abbreviation, "The Mirror Stage," when referring to Lacan's essay, whilst I will refer to the mirror stage or phase in reference to the psychological phenomenon he describes. For a detailed exegesis of Lacan's essay, see 'Author,' 2018.
- <sup>3</sup> Dylan Evans, "From Lacan to Darwin," in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David S. Wilson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 38-55; See, for instance, Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 247. To place these discussions in context, it is worth recalling that Lacan's consistent use of animal examples and zoological case studies throughout his career is perhaps symptomatic of another thematic trend of Freud's that he remains faithful to. As Kelly Oliver has noted, "In nearly every essay he wrote, Freud mentions animals: animal examples, animal anecdotes, animal metaphors, animal idioms, and, of course, animal phobias" (2009, 247). Not only is the list of species long, but as Oliver notes, the most foundational of his concepts, "including the primary processes of displacement and condensation, the castration complex, the Oedipal complex, anxiety, neurosis, and the family romance" all revolve around animals (247). In addition, some of Freud's most famous cases are inextricably bound up with animals: Little Hans and his horse phobia, Little Arpad with his chicken phobia, the Rat-Man, the Vulture-Man and the Wolf-Man, to name a few. Furthermore, his obsession with feral children, his reliance on Darwin and later in life, his obsession with his own pet dogs who were included in sessions with his analysands, reveal an enduring fascination with animal others: conscious or unconscious. As Oliver observes, "whenever Freud needs an example to prove his point, he trots out the animal phobias" (261).
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Billig has for instance noted this theme, see Michael Billig, "Lacan's Misuse of Psychology: Evidence, Rhetoric and the Mirror Stage," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 1-26.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Ziser, "Animal Mirrors: Poe, Lacan, von Uexküll, and Audubon in the Zoosemiosphere," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 12 (2007): 11-33.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Buse, "The Dog and the Parakeet," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22 (2017): 133-145.
- <sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.
- <sup>8</sup> This intervention is situated within a broader gesture within scholarship on the animal which seeks to revisit canonical thinkers and texts in an attempt to trouble the ease with which their contributions are too hastily diagnosed as anthropocentric. See, for instance, Daniel Cook, "The More-Than-Human Other of Levinas's Totality & Infinity," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 30 (2022): 58-78, and Christina M. Gchwandtner, "What About Non-Human Life? An 'Ecological' Reading of Michel Henry's Critique of Technology," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 20 (20120): 116-138.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, "A materialist definition of the phenomenon of consciousness," in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 2, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli and ed. Jacques Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1954] 1988), 49.

- <sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, [1966] 2001), 1-2; A further inconsistency, Lacan uses the words "monkey" (*singe*) and "chimpanzee" (*chimpanzé*) within "The Mirror Stage" interchangeably, even though a chimpanzee is not in fact a monkey, but a great ape.
- <sup>11</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1.
- <sup>12</sup> For instance, regarding those who presume Lacan is citing Wallon, see Lionea Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World, 2009); Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Phillipe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York: New York University Press, 1994). Regarding those who read Lacan as citing Köhler, see Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (New York: Palgrave, [1988] 1995); Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); and Brian Robertson, *Lacanian Antiphilosophy and the Problem of Anxiety: An Uncanny Little Object* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, "Wolfgang Köhler's the Mentality of Apes and the Animal Psychology of his Time," *Spanish Journal of Psychology* 17 (2014): 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, trans. Ella Winter (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1925] 1957), 268.
- <sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1986] 1990), 414; It is important to pause here to acknowledge the habitual style within Lacan's work that assumes an intellectual authority that is not demonstrated in the manner typical to rigorous scholarly work (Billig 2006, 22; Evans 2005, 45). As Michael Billig notes, given his "references to the master-slave relationship of language, it is not difficult to say that Lacan places his readers in the subservient position of needing to accept the authoritative word of the master" (2006, 21). Indeed, Lacan enacted this dynamic with his seminar audiences. Curiously, it appears to be manifest in interpretations of "The Mirror Stage" which also, as a general rule, do not reference (or at times appear to even read) his sources. Wallon is however not the only notable influence missing from "The Mirror Stage," in which a lack of bibliographic detail and key oversights both within the text and throughout Lacan's scholarship comprise a pattern. Although, see Yannis Stavrakakis, "Wallon, Lacan and the Lacanians: Citation Practices and Repression," *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (2007):131-38. Stavrakakis notes (in direct response to Billig), Lacan was "a practicing analyst who never hesitated to stress the distance between his work and standard academic discourse," and much of his published work consists of transcribed lectures, for which citational practices are indubitably different (2007, 134).
- <sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1986] 1990), 143.
- <sup>17</sup> Lacan, The Mirror Stage, 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Karl Bühler, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, trans. Donald Fraser Goodwin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, [1934] 2011), 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1.
- <sup>20</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 1.
- <sup>21</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2.

- <sup>22</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, [1956] 2001), 151-152.
- <sup>24</sup> Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” 152.
- <sup>25</sup> Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” 152.
- <sup>26</sup> Lacan “The Freudian Thing,” 151.
- <sup>27</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, [1966] 2001), 94.
- <sup>28</sup> Lacan, “The Freudian Thing,” 152.
- <sup>29</sup> Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- <sup>30</sup> Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- <sup>31</sup> Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- <sup>32</sup> Lacan “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- <sup>33</sup> Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis,” 92.
- <sup>34</sup> Catherine Clement, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 85.
- <sup>35</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1946] 2002), 151.
- <sup>36</sup> Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” 151.
- <sup>37</sup> Lacan, “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” 151.
- <sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Lionel Bailly’s *Lacan: A Beginner’s Guide* (2009).
- <sup>39</sup> Lacan, The Mirror Stage, 2.
- <sup>40</sup> See, for example, the following YouTube videos for a visual illustration, noting in particular the recurring behaviour which appears to denote a kind of checking of the mirror’s outline, and a touching and grasping of the mirror’s surface: Nicola L, “Baby in the mirror,” Youtube video, 2:03, June 11, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7Box3Yp1Yk>; Jessica Pressman, “The Mirror Stage,” YouTube video, 2:03, June 6, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DW-pyip7Yo>.
- <sup>41</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 1.
- <sup>42</sup> (Lacan [1966] 2002, 151)
- <sup>43</sup> See Todd Dufresne, *Returns of the French Freud: Freud, Lacan, and Beyond*, (London: Routledge, 2013); Bruce Fink, *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan’s Seminar VIII, Transference* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), and Malcom Bowie, *Lacan*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Debra Bergoffen, “Casting Shadows: The body in Descartes, Sartre, De Beavoir, and Lacan,” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 4 (1992): 232-243, for just a few examples of this consistent interpretative theme.

<sup>44</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2.

<sup>45</sup> Although this study is discussed by Lacan and his commentators in terms of the chimpanzee only, Köhler's study also included two orangutans (Köhler [1925] 1957).

<sup>46</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

<sup>47</sup> Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 2.

<sup>48</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

<sup>49</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

<sup>50</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 268.

<sup>51</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

<sup>52</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan's concept of the mirror stage is very heavily indebted to early Freudian conceptions of human psychological development; here, primary narcissism, first introduced by Freud in his 1914 essay: Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, XIV (1914-1916)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, [1914] 2001), 67-73. Elisabeth Roudinesco defines it thus: "Primary narcissism is a first state, prior to the constitution of the ego and therefore auto-erotic, through which the infant sees his own person as the object of exclusive love - a state that precedes his ability to turn towards external objects" (2003, 29). It is this stage, this "first state," that provides the framework for the subsequent development of the ego, which is arrived at, rather than given (29). Freud's logic in positing a primary narcissism prior to the ego runs as follows:

I may point out that we are bound to suppose that 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. ([1914] 2001, 77)

That is, humans are born with auto-erotism, but require "something added" in order to experience primary narcissism, which is a constitutive and formative facet of ego development (77). Freud argues that the infant initially is composed of a range of sensations and experiences, but due to his infantile state, simply experiences these sensations as a kind of synesthetic kaleidoscope, anchored in no one body, limb, or object. These experiences are not organised into a system of signification, nor do they form any patterns, and the infant lacks any notion that there is a subject who perceives. Throughout this stage, the infant's libido is focused solely on its own body: it cathects its entire "self" with its libido, and loves only itself. He referred to this self-love as "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation," as the desire which compels the impulse to survive (73). This is the state of primary narcissism, and it is the ensuing second step, that is the intervention of the social, that provides the necessary psychological action to bring the infant out of primary narcissism. The "something" that is "added" to enable the formation of the ego, unlike the biology that preceded it, then, is Culture (77). What the advent of the embryonic ego does here is establish a sense of identity; an elemental "me" that unifies these diverse perceptions which otherwise are experienced as heterogeneous and dispersed, although they now emerge as somewhat centred and amalgamated. Grosz summarises this symbiotic play of perception and the ego, which allows the development of the subject as a surface, by explaining, "The ego is a consequence of a perceptual surface; it is produced and grows only relative to the surface" (1994, 32). Once inaugurated into the social, the infant can



identify with other subjects and objects, and introject them to form its ego ideal. With the formation of the ego ideal, the infant begins to distance itself from primary narcissism and starts to cathect objects beyond its own body. Despite this debt to Freudian thinking, Lacan's only explicit reference to primary narcissism in "The Mirror Stage" occurs when he narrates the transition from primary narcissism to secondary narcissism (the conversion of ego libido to object libido) when he states that "the specular *I* turns into the social *I*" ([1966] 2001, 4). Here, Lacan is referring to the mirror stage moment at which the infant grasps itself as an object, and thus realises other bodies and objects in their relationship to him. Together these form the terms of reference necessary for him to form a primitive sense of self.

<sup>54</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

<sup>55</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

<sup>56</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 270.

<sup>57</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 278.

<sup>58</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 275.

<sup>59</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 275.

<sup>60</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 275.

<sup>61</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 258; The nature of this hand-clasping gesture has since been validated by Jane Goodall and others. In an article in which she discusses the lexicon of chimpanzee and other primate gestures, social behaviour, as well as the complexity of chimpanzee social life, she outlines that common hand gestures and greeting gestures include the holding out of a hand, which is sometimes responded to by clasping the held out hand, as in a common human handshake. Due to the considerable cross-species parallel, Goodall argues that the handshake greeting gesture of certain human cultures may be derived from the greeting repertoires of chimpanzees. See Jane Goodall, "The Behaviour of Free-living Chimpanzees in the Gombe Stream Reserve," *Behaviour of Chimpanzees 1* (1968): 161-311.

<sup>62</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 270, emphasis added; Since Lacan's time, self-recognition and mirror tests, such as the famous red dot test, have substantially increased in sophistication. For further reading on the red dot test, see the initial work of its creator, Gordon Gallup Jr., namely: Gordon Gallup Jr., "Mirror-image stimulation," *Psychological Bulletin* 70 (1968): 782-93, and Gordon Gallup Jr., "Chimpanzees: Self-recognition," *Science* 167 (1970): 86-97. And yet, in contemporary experiments with chimpanzees, including infant chimpanzees, their behaviour upon being placed in front of a mirror is consistent with the captivation that Köhler describes. Running back and forth, pacing, and moving extremely close to the mirror and then in the next moment far away from it, these responses resemble precisely what human infants do upon the observation of their own specular double. Animated and engaging in what seems to be gleeful play behaviour, it certainly appears as if these chimpanzees are also caught in the enchanting throes of curious self-discovery. Indeed, it was Darwin's very descriptions of his encounter with orangutans at the zoo, seeing them gaze into a looking-glass, that inspired the mirror test. Darwin's descriptions of these events largely align with Köhler's findings, and can be found in: Charles Darwin, "Supplemental Note on Sexual Selection in Relation to Monkeys," in *The Origin of Species by Means of Sexual Selection and The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, ed. Robert M. Hutchins, (Chicago: William Benton, [1876] 1952), 598-600, and Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, ed. Francis Darwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1890] 2009), as well as in recently published personal notes, see Jon Van Whyhe and Peter Kjærgaard, "Going the whole orang: Darwin, Wallace and the natural history of orangutans," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 51 (2015): 53-63. Of considerable similarity to Köhler's chimpanzees is a

section from these personal notes, in which, as per Lacan, Darwin frames self-recognition and the nature of reflection as a puzzle:

Both were astonished beyond measure at looking glass, looked at it every way, sideways, & with most steady surprise. - after some time stuck out lips, like kissing, to glass, & then the two did when they were first put together. - at last put hand behind glass at various distances, looked over it, rubbed front of glass, made faces at it - examined whole glass - put face quite close & pressed it - at last half refused to look at it - startled & seemed almost frightened, & evidently became cross because it could not understand puzzle. - Put body in all kinds of positions when approaching glass to examine it. (Darwin in Whyte and Kjærgaard 2015, 58; unconventional punctuation is original)

Interestingly, whilst the “*Aha-Erlebnis*” expression was coined by Bühler, it was never employed by Köhler in discussing chimpanzee behaviour. In fact, in Charles Darwin, “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant,” *Mind*, 2 (1877): 285-94, Darwin recounts complex relationships between mirror recognition and his own toddlers, even recording an instance with one of his children who recognised his reflection by exclaiming, “ha!” (Billig 2006, 18).

<sup>63</sup> Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, “Köhler’s *Mentality of Apes*,” 6.

<sup>64</sup> Köhler in Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, “Köhler’s *Mentality of Apes*,” 6.

<sup>65</sup> Gabriel Ruiz and Natividad Sanchez, “Köhler’s *Mentality of Apes*,” 6.

<sup>66</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 167.

<sup>67</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 167.

<sup>68</sup> Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes*, 169.

<sup>69</sup> Evans, “From Lacan to Darwin,” 47.

<sup>70</sup> Evans, “From Lacan to Darwin,” 47.

<sup>71</sup> Although, his commentators tend not to perceive this ambiguity and the dilemma it raises, most read him to be arguing in line with Wallon on this point.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the letter in the Unconscious,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, [1966] 2002), 435.

<sup>73</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” 190.