

The Mirror World: Being as Nothingness

Qixuan Ye^{1,a,*}

¹St. Hilda's School, Gold Coast, 4212, Australia

a. aliceqixuanye@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The question of whether the perceived world is a mere illusion has been a key area of interest to both essentialism and existentialism. Plato, the essentialist, argues that there is an objective reality transcendent to that which we perceive. Lacan, similarly, proposed that there exists a totality of reality in the human psyche, open to neo-natal children who have not yet entered the external world through language. In this paper, I argue that Lacan had taken a different route to Plato via his portrayal of the Real, that is, the original state of the world before it is rendered inaccessible by the ego's entrance into the perceived reality, or the Mirror World. Elusive of being formulated by the signs of the perceived reality, or the Imaginary-Symbolic order, it is but a nothingness without concrete being. What exists is what is accepted as a part of the linguistic and epistemological conventions of the external world, and the perceived reality a mere Mirror Reflection of the psychic and social symbols and is thus illusory. The Ego, likewise, is argued to be contingent and imaginary, born out of its misidentification with one's mirror image that one sees in the external world.

Keywords: Essentialism, Plato, Lacan, Sartre, Ontological Nihilism

1. Introduction

Despite both being dualists who refuse to draw a line of symmetry between being and appearance, the essentialist Plato and the psychoanalyst Lacan have taken distinctively different routes in illustrating the perceived reality as untrue. The primary division between the Mirror World of Plato and Lacan lies in their ideas about what lies beyond our perceived reality, or more fundamentally, if there is an objective reality--in other words, noumenon--beneath the perceived reality at all. Plato's model could only be true given that an intrinsic essence exists beneath the appearance of being. Lacan proposes the concept of The Real as an order that escapes representation and symbolism [1], that is, the forces that produce the illusion of being that we take as our perceived reality. Nonetheless, to Lacan, essence is not seen as a priori for the perceived reality to be illusory. Reality only comes into being through the ego's entrance into language and the social context that accompanies it, in which it first misrecognises the images of the others as its own image and then accepts the laws and restrictions realised through the lingual context as the reality of the world. This paper argues that both the ego's sense of the world and its sense of self are illusory. We, therefore, reside in a Mirror World, that is, a distorted Mirror Reflection of the underlying structure of our perceived reality, conventionally known as the noumenon, rather than the reality itself. Without endorsing the Platonist assumption that *essence precedes existence* which weakens the Mirror World argument by mandating the existence of intrinsic essences as a prior, Lacan depicts the illusion of the perceived reality as

devoid of noumenon and essence and a mere effect produced by language instead. Under this framework of the Mirror World, not only is the perception of the external world, that is, the world of the Other, fundamentally an illusion, but the perception of self, or inner world, is also reduced to an illusion as it is essentially a by-product of the external world.

2. Lacan's Mirror World and the Absence of Noumenon

The idea that the perceived reality is a Mirror Reflection of what is true has always incited fierce philosophical debates. The essentialist Plato, for example, devises the existence of an Ideal World of Forms behind the perceived reality. Transcendent to our own world, Plato speaks of this realm of essence through Socrates' voice in his dialogues found in *The Republic*, as a pattern that embodies the ideals of everything that is reproduced in the physical universe [2]. This renders the perceived reality, that is, perception of the physical world, as essentially illusory and a mere mirror reflection of what is real. The realm in which we live and think now acquires its status as a *mirror* reflecting the ideals and archetypes in the mind of divinity (*Demiurge*) of Plato who crafted the physical world, which is composed of shadows and mirrored images of the objects' designated essence [3]. Our perceived reality, therefore, is but a Mirror World reflecting the essence of things, a distorted image of the ideals of *Demiurge*. In describing true knowledge as the reminiscence of the intelligible realm of Forms, this outlook would necessarily imply that all the knowledge of the perceived reality is merely knowledge of the Mirror Reflection of the world rather than the world itself. For the essentialist, all phenomena, or all things observable, can be reduced to a contingent shadow of the reality beneath, that is, the essence.

Unlike the dialectical monism of Sartre which interprets reality as a unified whole, with no distinction between the phenomenal reality and noumenal reality, between what appears and what is, Plato insists upon an inequation between phenomena and essence, with phenomena being illusory, if not deceptive, and the essences being the objective reality beneath the Mirror World. With a premise that essence precedes existence, this Platonist reasoning of the Mirror World is to some extent flawed as it requires the existence of an intrinsic essence as a necessary condition for the proposal to be true. If there is no intrinsic essence to craft the perceived reality from, then either (1) the physical world would not exist to be perceived or (2) the concept of the Mirror World is false and that the world we perceive is the ultimate reality of the world. However, if a world which we perceive does exist, be it a Mirror Reflection or not, then it is proven that (1) is fallacious. But if (2) is true, then the Mirror World hypothesis no longer holds true. Therefore, Plato's Mirror World necessitates that *essence precedes existence*. The existence of essence is held as a priori for any perceived reality to exist at all. If there is no noumenal reality as Sartre claimed, and that the phenomenal reality is the only reality, then it would contradict the already-established idea that phenomenon must be a Mirror Reflection of the noumenon. Plato provides no justification as to how a perceived reality can still exist if the noumenon is absent. Therefore, an alternative argument needs to be established to answer the question of whether the perceived world is merely a Mirror Reflection of reality, and more essentially, why it is nothingness that lies beneath the Mirror World instead of any noumenon.

Another outlook on the perceived reality as the Mirror World effectively avoids this inherent flaw in Plato's argument and still holds true without having *essence precedes existence* as a priori. In lieu of proposing that the perceived reality reflects higher essences, Jacques Lacan, taking the perceived reality as a result of the ego's psychic experiences, suggests that the Mirror World is constitutionally the ego's misrecognition of the perceived reality as noumenon, and the Other as itself. During this process termed the Mirror Stage by Lacan, the ego mistakes its images in the mirror or the images of the Other as itself, in which it reduces itself to an object to be viewed from outside itself. This phenomenon known as the *imago*, or Ideal Ego, is constructed through the narcissistic fantasization of the ego in which it envisions a wholeness of itself which it does not possess [4]. Now, what the

ego perceives of itself is a distinct Other; the Mirror Reflection that the ego sees of itself is illusory by nature. Once the ego begins to mistake this illusion as what constitutes itself, a lifelong tension between identity and non-identity starts. Non-identity overlaps with and eventually overtakes identity first through the force of fantasization of the Imaginary, and this *imago* is further consolidated by the lingual narrative of the Symbolic, by the rules and dictates of the society. It is through this separation of the true condition of incompleteness of the ego and the illusory state of its wholeness that the ego it starts to build its own image from the alien images it misidentifies as its own in the external world (*umwelt*) and the fragments of its Real body. The ego, after the neo-natal months, can thus be seen as residing in the external world, depicted by Lacan as the Symbolic-Imaginary order. As an artificial realm constituted of *demand* to become the *imago* and the *desire* to conform to the socially constructed symbols and signs, the external world is realised through language—an external force which deviates the ego from its neo-natal state of incompleteness.

Both the Imaginary and Symbolic order has a linguistic aspect [5]. Signifiers are in the realm of the Symbolic, whose existence is a pure negativity, and which is only able to manifest themselves through the mutual differences between each other [6]. The signified--the mental concept the signifier invokes--and signification--the interaction between signifiers to deliver the illusion of the signified—are on the other hand, Imaginary [7]. Language can therefore be seen as the entrance into the Mirror World, that is, a reality constructed through the interaction between the inner world--that is, the ego's psychic experience within the structure of the 'I' formed during its entrance into the perceived reality--and the external world of the Others. For Lacan, there is no essence beneath the illusory surface of the Mirror World. He is an infidel to the dualism of being and appearance, but an infidel only in this sense that he rejects the Platonist noumena as the essence, or the being of the phenomena. Whilst insisting that appearance does not equate to being, Lacan rejects the essentialist idea that there is some sort of noumenon beneath the Mirror World. The Real of Lacan, which is somewhat seen as a parallel to Plato's Ideal World outside of the cave, is fundamentally different to what can be termed *essence* and thus contradicts the essentialist outlook of the Mirror World. The Real, as seen in Lacan's seventh seminar, is not the conventional Kantian thing-in-itself, or the noumenon, but a quasi-Hegelian nonentity, that is, an empty realm composed of opposing forces. It is an intrapsychic experience of the unstable oscillation between excesses and lacks, between presences and absences rather than any noumenon. For the Real is only a derivative of the senses, that is, devoid of any essence and concrete being. It is a realm in which language is absent and is thus elusive to the ego's grasp. The Real does not come into being, as 'there is no such thing as a prediscursive reality' [8]. No signifier or signified, no social or juridical context, can exist outside of language. Language is what makes the illusion of reality possible. In excluding the possibility of language in the Real and thus the possibility for the Real to be manifested, Lacan has reduced The Real to an order unattainable, outside of both the inner world which the ego occupies as an imaginary interior space and the external world in which the big Other—the alien language we are born into and must adopt—resides.

This view regarding the absence of noumenon and phenomenon as an illusion, however, has drawn criticisms from objectivists who insist upon the idea that the reality is independent of perception. The verifiability principle of Ayre, for example, holds that a statement is meaningful insofar it is empirically verifiable, through observations and evidence [9]. Applying such a principle upon the Lacanian Mirror World, one might say that it is impossible to prove that the perceived reality is a phenomenon devoid of noumenon, and that it is definitively language that constitutes the phenomenon. However, according to this logic, neither can one ever prove Plato's argument that noumenon must exist beneath phenomenon. For logically, the phenomenon alone is what one has access to. This would necessarily eliminate all metaphysics—not only that of Lacan, but also that of Plato. Essentialism, as well as Plato's metaphysical objectivism in insisting upon the existence of an Ideal World, simply cannot be empirically proven or falsified. Even the phenomenon, the only

dimension one has contact with, cannot be ascertained as objective as none has the means to analyse its exact content and constitutional parts. Therefore, to say that reality exists objectively—which entails the assumed existence of essence, or Forms—is a meaningless statement under the logical framework of Ayre’s principle. Considering the previously established flaw in Plato’s argument that the perceived reality cannot exist without essences, if it is given that the existence of essences cannot be proven, then the existence of the perceived reality could also be deduced as unverifiable. Comparatively, Lacan’s Mirror World, even though the absence of noumenon cannot be empirically proven, still allows the existence of a perceived reality regardless of whether essences exist or not. The Mirror-World-without-noumenon is therefore logically possible.

The Mirror World of Lacan is, as we have seen, phenomenon without noumenon, and appearance without being. This veneer of appearance that we take as our perceived reality, this Mirror World of ours, is but an intangible illusion concocted by the dialectical connection between the ego’s inner world and external world. The Lacanian Real has thus avoided the paradox of the essentialist Ideal World, portraying a Mirror World devoid of essences.

3. Perception of World as Illusion

Though both Plato and Lacan propose the existence of phenomenon as essentially illusory, what compose the perceived reality of the external world has incited contrast. The stance of Plato and the majority of essentialists is that of objectivism, in holding that there is any noumenon beneath the phenomenon, or the Mirror World. Plato’s Ideal World, noumenon behind the perceived reality of ours, is another dimension where souls dwell, existing in the mind of divinity. In the Cave Allegory of *Part VII*, Plato describes human existence as an imprisonment inside a cave with a burning fire, in which all objects passing across the opening of the cage seen by the prisoners are shadows of what they truly are. Two dimensions of the world arise from this analogy: there is the perceived reality for which the source of light is the fire; there is the Ideal World, for which the light source that reveals being and knowledge is the Forms [10]. In the platonic sense, Forms are abstract and enduring ideals or concepts of Truth that transcend spacetime, which can be understood—in the context of this study—as the objective reality beneath the Mirror World [11]. The phenomenon is a shadow, or a Mirror Reflection mimicking the Forms, or the essences, of things. Under this model, true knowledge of essence is possible, hidden in one’s memories of the Forms that one had once acquainted with in heaven, and that all learning is recollection [12,13]. In short, the Platonist perceived reality is composed of reflection of essences that are enduring and eternal, resistant to any subjective interferences by the ego. The ego is merely situated in the Mirror World, which is a distorted reflection of the Ideal World. Perceived reality, for Plato, is untrue and yet somewhat tangible since it is an imitation of the Forms. The fire that lights up the cave is not an illusion, but merely an imitation, of the sun which is the source of true knowledge.

Lacan, on the other hand, asserts that the external world is but an illusory network of discourses existing in the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. The ego, after having misrecognised its own image in the Other, finds itself in a lingual dimension which constitutes its perceived reality of the world. Interpreting Lacan’s works, the *umwelt* can be seen as an illusory network weaved together by language to compose the perceived reality in which the ego dwells. The external world has two aspects: one private, and one collective. The private aspect is built by sense-data, taken from Russell. Such data refer to the way particular objects are perceived by the ego perceives, accessible only to one perceiving subject. Cultural data, on the other hand, as a concept introduced by this paper, refer to the part of the perceived world constituted by the collective acceptance of linguistically constructed norms and laws, such as state and authority.

In his Symbolic-Real-Imaginary triad, the Ego is situated within an intricate network of perception and representations of the external world. The three orders, or *registers*, were first wholistically

formulated by Lacan in his 1953 seminar *The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real* [14]. The human psyche is divided into three registers that connect it to the external world as an interrelated giant network. The Real, as mentioned above, is a derivative from pure sensual perceptions, exclusively for neo-natal children without a sense of the division between the I and the Other. It is a stage of both completeness and nothingness that one cannot return to once one has entered the external world through the domesticating force of linguistic and social conventions, and a stage that is impossible to be accessed. Since reality is built through language and language only, the Real is not the inner world, that is, the ego's psychic experiences. Instead, the inner world is always shaped by the forces of the external world, born out of language. The inner world does not exist independent of the external world and is only possible through its interaction with the lingual context. Therefore, out of the two components of perceived reality, the perceived world needs to be ascertained as illusory if one was to ever announce the perception of self as illusory, for the perceived self is essentially a Mirror Reflection of the former. The Symbolic is an order responsible for the illusion of the perceived world, being a derivative of language, or more precisely, of *langue*, that is, an internalised system of language based on cultural conventions and universal grammar [15]. As opposed to *parole*, which refers to the individual aspect of language, *langue* is the realm of signs as the language of the big Other. The signs, a concept taken from the structural linguist de Saussure, are the basic units of *langue* that are each composed of two parts: the signifier (the mental image of the sound of the word), and the signified (the concept that the signifier refers to) [16]. However, unlike Saussure who insisted that the two are linked by an unbreakable bond, Lacan refused to draw the conclusion of reciprocity between the signifier and the signified. Instead, the relationship between them is characterised with instability: the signifier is not dependent upon the signified, and that the signified is solely the effect of signifiers. The signified is produced, not given [17]. Further, it is signifiers that are the basic units of language instead of signs for Lacan [18]. Perception of the world, therefore, relies upon signifiers.

Once *thrown* into the world, to put it in Heidegger's words, the *I* has entered a world of the big Other—an already established system of rules, laws, grammar, conduct, and most importantly, signifiers, all through the power of language. Constitutive of the Symbolic order, the signifiers are in a sense, *cultural data* shared collectively within a specific lingual context. Cultural data is the collective aspect of the external world, opposed to Russell's sense-data. The Platonist real essentialist would argue that everything has a fixed essence, constant identity that is independent of the viewer, exemplified by Plato's idea of the Forms [19]. But the mouldy patches on the pale green wall in front of me would only appear as those oblong-shaped spits of congealed sea foam in early dawn as I lie on the floor, looking up at the wall standing blankly, whilst the soft light entrenches the wallpaper at this tilted angle. No other person could view the same thing at the same angle, same lighting, same mentality. That is my sense-data, and the private aspect of the external world. For another pair of eyes, another consciousness, it would never be the same shade of green seen on those stains. In Sartre's 1938 metaphysical novel *Nausea*, the hero and narrator Roquentin perceives the upholstered bus seat with 'its red skin, thousands of small red paws in the air, quite stiff' [20]. The crimson creature that Roquentin perceives is his private sense-data, unable to be seen by any other person. Russell's sense-data is within the realm of private language, with the ego's inner world, as a Mirror Reflection of the inner psychic experiences.

Cultural data, on the other hand, belongs only to the realm of the others, the external world, and is internalised by the ego in the *reality of the world* as it enters a certain lingual context. Ascertaining that cultural data is only made possible through collective acceptance of the cultural data, Lacan called the realm of the big Other, or the Symbolic order, 'the battery of signifiers' [21]. Signifiers have no meaning outside of the social context, and the social context has no meaning outside of the lingual context. The value of any signifier is derived from its difference from other signifiers within the lingual context. The notion of male and female in the psyche, for example, is devoid of the

biological aspect. This has often incited criticisms from essentialists, who tend to hold gender as an essential and unalterable property, with a causal relationship with a body's anatomical features' [22]. The Lacanian refutes this by stating that sexual difference is only possible at a Symbolic level, as it must rely upon signifiers, that is, mutual differences between the male and the female, to gain any meaning at all in its lingual context' [23]. The girl in Freud's Penis Envy has only become a sexed subject when she assumes that she has lost her own upon seeing the anatomy of a boy. And the boy, upon realising such anatomical differences, develops castration complex in fear of losing his. Thus, the boy and the girl only come into being through such a psychical confrontation. Anatomical features alone do not constitute the female and the male; it is the signifiers that distinguish between those features that have constructed femininity and masculinity. Similar constructs exist in the external world, and they constitute and maintain the Mirror Reflection of the external world that we take as our *world*.

Michel Foucault, when claiming that man did not exist in the Classical age, did not mean humanity itself did not exist, but rather that, the language as a signifying system was lacking. 'There was no epistemological consciousness of man as such', wrote Foucault in *The Order of Things*' [24]. Discourses did not conceptualise humanity but were solely composed of nouns and verbs. Economics did not exist, but only examination of trade and exchange through simple terms. It was not until the Enlightenment did those discourses grew in-depth and distinctiveness, giving birth to separate sciences: economics, linguistics, biology etc. This completed Symbolic order was somehow lacking. However, the field of representation and symbolism has always remained present as long as there is a lingual context, in which the cultural data realises itself. Even if man did not exist in the Classical age, some discourses—and thus some parts of man—remained present. Here, we shall shed some light upon the concept of *social construction* introduced by Berger and Luckmann, which interpreted culture, or perceived reality of the world, as a series of institutionalised representations of concepts, actions, and norms [25]. Even in the Classical age, man was still the locus of knowledge, that is, a pipe through which cultural and lingual conventions were strengthened and upheld, even if they were not of the same complexity as they are today. The norms of the Classical age were unity, order and appeal to the intellect. The norms of our era, or *zeitgeist*, are capitalism, democracy, and political correctness. Further, such norms also differ from one lingual reality to another, from English to French, from Russian to German. Each with a distinct culture that argues that 'it forbids only that which is unnatural', with unnaturalness defined by the dominant discourse of the Symbolic order [26]. The external world demands the ego to conform to such dominant discourse, or the institutionalised way of constituting knowledge. *Langue* is constituted of the dominant discourse, being language of the community. It is in the ego's passive acceptance of such a discourse and internalisation of its signifiers, that the *umwelt* is born.

In seeing the external world, it is the signifiers we see instead of the Real object, which does not exist since language fails to capture it. Signifiers are the Mirror Reflections of our collective fantasization, realised through language. The chestnut trees outside of the window I see never evoke the same images in another mind, and my sense-data are forever different to those of Sartre's Roquentin when he imposes the structure of a chestnut tree upon all those roots of the tree he saw, realising that existence hides behind a veneer of essence. Private sense-data, together with public cultural data, make up the appearance of the *umwelt*. To Lacan, signifiers can also be without any signified, without a referent and an agreed-upon meaning. Such signifiers, called floating signifiers, are the strongest iron bars locking us in this Mirror World of ours. State, power, and money are but a few examples. Social constructions they are, having been created in the Symbolic order, they maintain their existence as *visible* and *concrete* walls of this prison. *Visible*, for they are born out of language and the lingual dimension, blossoming with the power of collective fantasization, and thus appear as an illusion of The Real to us. In describing the deep entrapment of the ego inside the Mirror World,

Lacan wrote: ‘Every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing. The more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is’ [27]. Stuck between all the symbols and representations of the external world, the ego is lost in the realm of the big Other. Social constructions are *concrete* illusions, because the prisoner, or the existent, is convinced of the necessity of such illusions. The ego requests to see the phenomenal reality as the noumenal reality, the perceived reality as *the reality* and the essence of things, the Symbolic and the Imaginary as the Real. However, this quasi-monism of Lacan is beyond the monism of appearance and being, such as that proposed by Sartre, for it is only a monism through self-deception. This self-deception is not the phenomenological *being emerging from appearance*, but *appearance devouring being*, *appearance constructing being*. The idea of reality as perceived reality, as perceived reality as construction is revealed by Lacan in stating that: ‘Truth hollows its way into the real thanks to the dimension of speech. There is neither true nor false prior to speech [28]. The appearance is taken as the being which does not exist. We live in the constructed truth of this Mirror World, through language and its orthopaedics, its dictates of social, cultural and lingual normality, which we take as *truth*. Bathed in a realm of signifiers which construct the *truth* of the *umwelt*, the ego is situated in a giant network of illusions beneath which there is no objective reality.

Through the Lacanian lens, we see a Mirror World in which essence is an illusion crafted not by a divine creator, but by the individual and collective imagination. There is no noumenon, no objective reality, and therefore no *truth* which Plato urges us to unveil. When stating that ‘it is with the appearance of language that the dimension of truth emerges’, Lacan is melancholic [29]. The *dimension* of truth, though still titled truth, is still a realm born out of the language of the external world and resides in language. A false reality without a reference is thus created. The perceived reality of the world is itself a floating signifier, a Mirror World built with language.

4. Perception of Self as Illusion

Just like how the external world only comes into existence through language, the inner world, the ‘I’ which the ego knows itself for, has no concrete meaning except through the ego’s confrontation with the Other in the external world. Perception of self, therefore, is illusory by nature in the same fashion that one’s perception of the world is a mere illusion.

In Lacan’s concept of the Mirror Stage, which was introduced in his 1949 seminar *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*, he proposed that a child’s identity is ‘decentred’ as they become capable of recognising themselves in their mirror image, either physically or metaphorically [30]. Endorsing Freud’s idea of the divided ego, Lacan sees the child before the Mirror Stage as a fragmented body in which the ego is both the I and the Other, unable to distinguish between the two. Having stumbled upon one’s mirror image in the external world for the first time, having seen this ‘virtual complex’ and the ‘reality it duplicates’, I expect the gain mastery and control over the body by identifying with the mirror image of *I*, that is, the unified self [31]. However, this identification with the mirror image, according to Lacan, is but a misrecognition of the self from the images of others. Further, as the self develops thematic consciousness of itself, it is inevitably trapped in a ‘concentration-camp form of the social link’ [32]. Crushed between the gaze of the Others, the ego, the *for-itself* as Sartre called it, is decentred as it tries to transcend itself through its activity and dynamics, whilst the external world acts as a source of overdetermination, that is, a web weaved by the discourses of the big Other trapping the ego inside. Having lost itself in the Mirror World of illusions, the ego is keen to define and redefine itself to differentiate itself from the Others, whom it views as objects, or thing-in-itself—immanent and composed of pure facticity. It is from there, the ego’s confrontation with itself begins. Entering the Imaginary order, what the ego wishes to transcend and arrive at is always under the influence of the giant net of the Symbolic order, that is, the *structure* of the Mirror World. The image the ego sees in the mirror is not that of itself but that of the big Other.

This allows it to gain a sense of completeness that it did not have previously based on what it sees in the Others around it through the force of imagination. The Imaginary is, fundamentally, a derivative of perceptual experiences, marking a shift from the ‘need’ of the Real Order to the ‘demand’ of the Imaginary as the child misrecognises the *imago* as itself. In this order, one develops desires that cannot be satisfied as one falsely recognises the representation they see in the external world as themselves, as the Ideal Ego, which veils the ego’s sense of its fragmented body in the neo-natal months. The imaginary, therefore, is an emulation of what one is taught to perceive the world through the existence of the Others. The nurturer of the child, for example, can be seen as a Mirror Image through which the child sees themselves. As a response to this false acquisition of the unity of self, the Ideal Ego is formed through the misrecognition of *I* in the external world.

‘I exist my body,’ wrote Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* [33]. The body, as a vessel through the external world, is not an object, a thing-in-itself like a bus or a train. The body withdraws from awareness and is present behind every action of the ego. In the solitude of the neo-natal months, the ego is not yet aware of its existence. The external world has not yet come into being as language is absent, and thus the inner world at this stage is also lacking. However, once the ego realises the disparity between its own knowledge of its fragmented body and the knowledge of a whole and complete body delivered through the gaze of the Others, the self becomes decentred from itself. The ego is coerced to realise that it is no longer the centre of being but a mere object to other consciousness. For this ‘body-seen-by-the-Other’ of mine, once I have recognised that the Other ‘has stolen my world from me’, the awareness I have of myself is the awareness of myself in relation to the Others [34]. My consciousness becomes self-reflective, and the image I have of myself becomes distorted. Thus, I am no longer aware of myself but aware of the pseudo ego that is a reference to the Others. Now, the unity of the ego is but an illusion, thought to be capable of total self-consciousness and forms the complete self-identity and yet unable to unentangle itself from the distorting gaze of the Others’ inner world. The Real is thus forever lost, destroyed language of the big Other, and taken over the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Self is illusory, and the inner world is but a construct of the external world. Plato, the essentialist, however, challenges the view by proposing the concept of the *true self*, which refers to the enduring, rational soul embodying the knowledge of the Forms beneath the shell of the physical body. Self, to Plato, is a phenomenon embodying a noumenon. Lacan denies any essence beneath the perceived reality of self, as the very existence of ego and its inner world is only possible through its interaction with the external world. The *imago* that the ego assumes to be constituting itself is orchestrated under the gaze of other existents, not the ego alone. The perceived self simply does not exist before the Mirror Stage, and once it comes into existence, it is not composed of the Real but that of the Imaginary, that of the Symbolic.

Taking the perceived self as a construct, Lacan criticised the absolutely free will proposed by the existentialist Sartre as impossible after the Mirror Stage, where both the world and self are products of misrecognition. The freedom subjected to a decentred ego is forever ‘a freedom that is never so authentically affirmed’, trapped ‘within the walls of a prison’ [35]. Here, the prison is born out of misrecognition: the ego first recognises itself in the eyes of the others, then traps itself in the language of the external world, and finally aligns its very being with the million other beings it perceives in the Mirror World. In depicting the overarching power of the dominant discourse, or the language of the external world in Lacan’s Symbolic realm, Foucault wrote: ‘The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.’ [36]. The ego simply does not craft its inner world; it is constructed by the external world built through language. The inner world is born out of the external world and for the external world. *Becoming* for the ego is but *adapting*: adapting to the gaze of the judges of

normality in the Symbolic order. Through this, the ego too becomes a constituent part of the illusion of the Mirror World.

5. Conclusion

By contrasting Plato and Lacan's depiction of the nature of reality, we have seen that the idea of physical reality as mere illusion does not necessarily require the dualism of being and appearance. In fact, in viewing the world as devoid of any essence, the concept of the Mirror World holds truer than ever: the external world is but a craft of our individual misrecognition of ourselves and our collective fantasization through the medium of language. Lacan, in his concept of Mirror Stage, sees infancy as a time in which the Mirror World has not yet formed, and thus a time devoid of reality. Entering the world of the Others, with all its symbols and constructions, the ego misrecognises those illusions as the truth. Through the acquisition of language, the ego is lost in a palace of mirrors, falsely seeking its own image in the beings around it. Thus, the ego is decentred: its knowledge of itself is the knowledge of how it is perceived by the Others. Self, like the perceived reality, is an illusion that partially composes the Mirror World. Devoid of noumenon or any objective reality, the perceived reality is but an illusion. In the Mirror World, being is only the appearance of being, and beneath that appearance, it is nothingness that prevails instead of essence.

References

- [1] Botting, F. (1994). "Relations of the Real in Lacan, Bataille and Blanchot." *SubStance*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 24–40. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3684791>. Accessed 4 Jun. 2022.
- [2] Rogers, A. K. (1936). "Plato's Theory of Forms." *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 61–78. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2179618>. Accessed 2 Jun. 2022.
- [3] Plato. (1937). *Plato's Cosmology; the Timaeus of Plato*. London: New York, Harcourt, Brace, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.
- [4] Gallop, J. (1982). "Lacan's 'Mirror Stage': Where to Begin." *SubStance*, vol. 11/12, pp. 118–28. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3684185>. Accessed 29 Jun. 2022.
- [5] Evans, D. (1996). *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 84
- [6] Evans, D. (1996). *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 203
- [7] Evans, D. (1996). *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 84
- [8] Lacan, J. (1975). *Le Séminaire. Livre XX. Encore, 1972-73*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Seuil, p. 33
- [9] Ayer, A. J. (1936). "The Principle of Verifiability." *Mind*, vol. 45, no. 178, pp. 199–203. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2250238>. Accessed 3 Jul. 2022.
- [10] Wright, J. H. (1906). "The Origin of Plato's Cave." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 17, pp. 131–42. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/310313>. Accessed 28 May 2022.
- [11] Silverman, A. (2022). "Plato's Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/plato-metaphysics/>.
- [12] Kidder, D. S., Oppenheim, N. D. (2006), *The Intellectual Devotional*, p. 27, Borders Group, Inc, Ann Arbor. ISBN 978-1-60961-205-4
- [13] Wolfsdorf, D. (2011). "Plato's Conception of Knowledge." *The Classical World*, vol. 105, no. 1, pp. 57–75. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41303487>. Accessed 1 Jul. 2022.
- [14] Lacan, J. (). *On the Names-of-the-Father. The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real: Inaugural meeting of SEP*, Paris: 8th July 1953. Translated by Bruce Fink, W.W. Norton, pp1-52.
- [15] de Saussure, C. (1984). *F. de Saussure's Theory of Language*. no. 38, 1984, pp. 83–97. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27758314>. Accessed 5 Jun. 2022.
- [16] Evans, D. (1996). *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, p. 186
- [17] Evans, D. (1996). *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, p. 189
- [18] Evans, D. (1996). *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, p. 189
- [19] Oderberg, D. (2007). *Real Essentialism*. London: Routledge.
- [20] Sartre, J-P. (1949). *Nausea*. Norfolk, Conn: New Directions.
- [21] Lacan, J. (1992). *'The Ethics of Psychoanalysis': 1959-1960: The seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Dennis Porter. London: Routledge.

- [22] Witt, C. (1995). "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory." *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 321–44. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43154216>. Accessed 1 Jul. 2022.
- [23] Lacan, J. (1998). 'On Feminine Sexuality the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX Encore'. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton.
- [24] Foucault, M. (2001). *The Order of Things*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- [25] Berger, P., Luckmann, T. (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality*. Penguin Books.
- [26] Harari, Y. (2015). *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: Harper.
- [27] Lacan, J. (1993). *The Seminar. Book III. The Psychoses, 1955-56*. Trans. Russell Grigg. London: Routledge, p. 185
- [28] Lacan, J. (1988). *The Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-54*. Trans. John Forrester. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.228
- [29] Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock Publications, p.172
- [30] Lacan, J. (2004). *Écrits: The First Complete Translation in English. The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience. Delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. W.W. Norton, London, pp.73-81
- [31] Lacan, J. (2004). *Écrits: The First Complete Translation in English. The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience. Delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. W.W. Norton, London, pp.73-81
- [32] Lacan, J. (2004). *Écrits: The First Complete Translation in English. The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience. Delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. W.W. Norton, London, pp.73-81
- [33] Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. London: Routledge, pp.362-379
- [34] Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. London: Routledge, pp.362-379
- [35] Lacan, J. (2004). *Écrits: The First Complete Translation in English. The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience. Delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg. W.W. Norton, London, pp.73-81
- [36] Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 298