

Primary and Secondary Reflection

Gabriel Marcel (1970)

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[T]he distinctive note of philosophic thought, at least according to my conception of it and I have many authorities for that conception, is that not only does it move towards the object whose nature it seeks to discover, but at the same time it is alert for a certain music that arises from its own inner nature if it is succeeding in carrying out its task. We have already said that the point about philosophic thought is that it is reflective, and it is into the nature of reflection, as an activity, that we must probe more deeply than we have done so far.

[2] As usual, I shall start with the simplest examples I can find, to show how reflection has its roots in the daily flow of life.

[3] I put my hand, let us say, into my pocket to take my watch out. I discover that my watch is not there; but it ought to be there; normally my watch is in my pocket. I experience a slight shock. There has been a small break in the chain of my everyday habits (between the act of putting my hand in my pocket and that of taking out my watch). The break is felt as something out of the way; it arrests my attention, to a greater or a less degree, according to the importance I attach to my watch; the notion that a valuable object may be lost arises in my mind, and this notion is not a mere notion but also a feeling of disquiet. I call in reflection to help me...but let us be careful here not to fall into the errors of an out-of-date psychology which isolated one faculty of the mind from another. It is very clear in the example I have chosen, and in every similar example, that reflection is nothing other than attention, in the case where attention is directed towards this sort of small break in the daily chain of habit. To reflect, in this kind of case, is to ask oneself how such a break can have occurred. But there is no place here for the kind of purely abstract speculation which, of its very nature, can have no practical outcome; what I have to do is to go back in time until I recall the moment when the watch was last in my possession. I remember, let us say, having looked at the time just after breakfast, therefore at that moment everything was still all right. Between then and now something must have happened to the watch. My mental processes are rather like—there is no avoiding the comparison—the actions of a plumber who is trying to trace a leak. Was there perhaps a hole in my pocket? I look at my pocket and discover that there is no hole. I continue with my task of alert

recapitulation. Say that I succeed in recalling the fact that there was a moment when I put the watch down on the table; and there, let us say, that watch still is. Reflection has carried out its task and the problem is solved... Let us notice, however, even in connection with this almost childish simple example, that I have made my mental effort because something real, something valuable, was at stake. Reflection is never exercised on things that are not worth the trouble of reflecting about. And, from another point of view, let us notice that reflection in this case was a personal act, an act which nobody else would have been able to undertake in my place, or on my behalf. The act of reflection is linked, as bone is linked with bone in the human body, to living personal experience and it is important to understand the nature of this link. To all appearances, it is necessary that the living personal experience should bump into some obstacle. One is tempted to use the following sort of metaphor. A man who has been traveling on foot arrives at the edge of a river where the bridge has been carried away by a flood. He has no option but to call a ferryman. In an example such as that which I have just cited, reflection does really play the part of the ferryman.

[4] But the same sort of thing can happen, of course, at the level of the inner life. I am talking to a friend, and somehow let myself be drawn into telling him something which is an actual lie. I am alone with myself again, I get a grip on myself, I face the fact of this lie, how was it possible for me to tell such a whopper? I am all the more surprised at myself because I have been accustomed to think of myself, up to the present, as a truthful and trustworthy person. But then what importance ought I to attach to this lie? Am I forced to conclude that I am not the man I thought I was? And, from another point of view, what attitude ought I to take up towards this act of mine? Ought I to confess the lie to my friend, or on the other hand would I make myself ridiculous, to let my friend laugh at me, as a sort of punishment for having told him the lie in the first place?

[5] As in the previous example, what we have here is a kind of break, that is to say, I cannot go on just as if nothing had happened; there really is something that necessitates an act of readjustment on my part.

[6] But here is the third example that will give us an easier access to the notion of reflection at the properly philosophical level. I have been disappointed by the behavior of somebody of whom I was fond. So I am forced to revise my opinion of this friend of mine. It seems, indeed, that I am forced to acknowledge that he is not the man I believed him to be. But it may be that the process of reflection does not halt there. A memory comes back to me—a memory of something I myself did long ago, and suddenly I ask myself: “Was this act of mine really so very different from the act which today I

feel inclined to judge so severely? But in that case am I in any position to condemn my friend?" Thus my reflections, at this point, call my own position into question. Let us consider this second stage. Here, again, I cannot go on as if nothing had happened. Then, what has happened? There has been this memory and this sort of confrontation that has been forced upon me, of myself and the person I was judging so harshly. But what does "myself" mean here? The point is that I have been forced to ask myself what I am worth, how true I ring. So far I had taken myself, so to speak, for granted. I quite naturally thought of myself as qualified to judge and eventually to condemn. Or perhaps even that is not quite the case: I used to believe or, what come to the same thing, I used to talk like a man qualified to judging others. In my heart of hearts, I did not really think of myself as such a man. Here, for the moment at least, this process of reflection may terminate. Such a reflection may leave me in a mood of anguish, and nevertheless I have a certain sense of being set free, the sense of which I spoke in the last lecture: it is as if I have overturned some obstruction in my way.

[7] But at this point a twofold and important realization is forced upon me; on the one hand, I am now able to communicate at a broader level with myself, since I have, as it were, introduced the self that committed the dubious act to the self that did not hesitate to set itself up as the harsh judge of such acts in others; and on the other hand—and this cannot be a mere coincidence—I am now able to enter into far more intimate communication with my friend, since between us there no longer stands that barrier which separates the judge on the bench from the accused on the dock.

[8] We have here a very striking illustration of that important notion of intercourse, on which I was expatiating the other day, and no doubt we shall later have to remember this illustration when we begin to discuss the topic of intersubjectivity properly so called.

[9] But meanwhile there are certain other observations on the relations between reflection and life that are pertinent at this point. There is a kind of philosophy, essentially romantic, or at least romantic in its roots, which very willingly contrasts reflection and life, sets them at opposite poles from each other; and it is permissible to notice that this contrast, or this opposition, is often stated in metaphors of heat and cold. Reflection, because it is critical, is cold; it not only puts a bridle on the vital impulses, it freezes them. Let us, in this case too, take a concrete example.

[10] A young man has let himself be drawn into saying rash things to a girl. It was during a dance, he was intoxicated by the atmosphere, by the music, the girl herself was a girl of unusual beauty. The dance is over, he comes home, he feels the intoxication of

the evening wearing away. To his sobered mood, reflection does present itself, in such a case, as something purely and merely critical: what is this adventure going to lead to? He has not the sort of job that would make marriage a reasonable proposition; if he were to marry this girl, they would have to lead a narrow, constricted, life; what would become of love in such sordid circumstances? And so on, and so on.... It is obvious that in such cases reflection is like the plunge under an icy shower that wakens one from a pleasant morning dreaminess. But it would be very rash to generalize from such examples, and even in regard to this particular example we ought to ask ourselves rather carefully what real relationship between reflection and life it illustrates. For I think we must be on our guard against a modern way of interpreting life as pure spontaneity. For that matter, I am not sure that spontaneity is, for the philosopher, a really distinct notion; it lies somewhere on these shadowy borders where psychology and biology run into each other and merge.

[11] The young Spanish philosopher, Julian Marias, has something relevant and useful to say about this in his *Introduction to Philosophy*. He says that the verb “to live” has no doubt a precise meaning, a meaning that can be clearly formulated, when it is applied, say to a sheep or a shark: It means to breathe by means of this organ and not that (by lungs or gills, as the case may be), to be nourished in such and such a fashion (by preying on other fish, by cropping grass), and so on. But when we are talking about human life the verb “to live” cannot have its meaning so strictly circumscribed; the notion of human life cannot be reduced to that of the harmonious functioning of a certain number of organs, though that purely biological functioning is, of course, presupposed in the notion of human life. For instance, a prisoner who has no hope of getting out of jail may say without exaggeration –though he continues to breathe, to eat, to perform all his natural functions—that his existence is not really a life. The mother of an airman might say in wartime, “While my son is risking his life, I am not really living.” All this is enough to make it clear that a human life has always its center outside itself; though it can be centered certainly, on a very wide and diverse range of outside interests. It may be centered on a loved one, and with the disappearance of the loved one be reduced to a sad caricature of itself; it may be centered on something trivial, a sport like hunting, a vice like gambling; it can be centered on some high activity, like research or creation. But each one of us can ask himself, as a character in one of my plays does, “What do I live by?” And this is not a matter so much of some final purpose to which a life may be directed as of the mental fuel that keeps a life alight from day to day. For there are, as we know only too well, desperate creatures who waste away, consuming themselves like lamps without oil.

[12] But from this point of view, from the human point of view we can no longer think of life as mere and pure spontaneity—and by the same token we can no longer think of reflection as life's antagonist. On the contrary, it seems to me essential that we should grasp the fact that reflection is still part of life, that it is one of the ways in which life manifests itself, or, more profoundly, that it is in a sense one of life's way of rising from one level to another. That, in fact, is the very point of the last few examples we have been taking. We should notice also that reflection can take many different shapes and that even conversion can be, in the last analysis, a sort of reflective process; consider the hero of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* or even Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. We can say therefore that reflection appears alien to life, or opposed to life, only if we are reducing the concept of human life to, as it were, a manifestation of animality. But it must be added that if we do perform this act of reduction, then reflection itself becomes an unintelligible concept; we cannot even conceive by what sort of a miracle reflection could be grafted on mere animality.

[13] So much for the relations between reflection and life; we would reach similar conclusions about the relations between reflection and experience, and this links up with what has been previously said. If I take experience as merely a sort of passive recording of impressions, I shall never manage to understand how the reflective process could be integrated with experience. On the other hand, the more we grasp the action of experience in its proper complexity, in its active and I would even dare to say in its dialectical aspects, the better we shall understand how experience cannot fail to transform itself into reflection, and we shall even have the right to say that the more richly it is experience, the more, also, it is reflection. But we must, at this point, take one step more and grasp the fact that reflection itself can manifest itself at various levels; there is primary reflection, and there is also what I shall call secondary reflection; this secondary reflection has, in fact, been very often at work during these early lectures, and I dare to hope that as our task proceeds it will appear more and more clearly as the special high instrument of philosophical research. Roughly, we can say that where primary reflection tends to dissolve the unity of experience which is first put before it, the function of secondary reflection is essentially recuperative, it reconquers that unity. [END.]