

THE «INNER» LIFE OF THE SOCIAL SELF: AGENCY, SOCIALITY, AND REFLEXIVITY

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Much ink has been spilled on the topic of the self. It is nonetheless a topic worthy of renewed consideration. The difficulty of doing justice to the range of phenomena related to the self is one reason for this. Closely connected to this, there is the challenge of bringing into sharp focus the most basic meaning of this commonplace term. Whatever we determine as its philosophical meaning, the ordinary sense of the word ought to be honored, as much as possible (cf. Wittgenstein; also Kenny)¹.

Neuroscience today is even more likely than psychology, in the guise of behaviorism, was in the middle decades of the twentieth century to occlude just what needs most to be illuminated: the human animal as a situated actor. The organism must be taken in its totality.² Moreover, it must be envisioned in its situatedness. Finally, the human organism must be seen as an *irrepressible* actor. Like all other organisms, the human animal is a constitutionally active being: it is compelled or, perhaps better expressed, propelled to act by its constitution as a living organism. Understanding the mechanism of the brain is, unquestionably, of immense importance. Understanding the nature of the self is, at least, of equal weight. Viewing the human animal as a situated actor is, accordingly, a first step in a promising direction. More certainly needs to be said. Whatever needs to be added to this characterization of the self obtains its force and pertinence by enhancing these features of this portrayal (the portrait of the human self as a situated actor).

Sociality and reflexivity are indeed no less fundamental than agency. The human self as a *social* agent is implied in the expression *situated actor*. From the time of its birth, the self is for the most part situated in the midst of others, either others immediately at hand or those not too far away. Others respond to the movements, expressions, and vocalizations of the infant in ways amounting to nothing

¹ In this paper, I am, once again, sketching a pragmatism portrait of the human self. In this project I am guided by a suggestion made by John Dewey. The «word ‘subject’ [at least a rough equivalent of self], if it is to be used at all, has», he suggests, «the organism for its proper *designatum*. Hence it refers to an agency of doing, not [or, at least, not primarily] to a knower, mind, consciousness or whatever» (Dewey, *LW* 14, 27). He adds later in this same text: «from the standpoint of a biological-cultural psychology the term ‘subject’ (and related adjectival forms) has only the significance of a certain kind of actual existence; namely, a living creature which under the influence of language and other cultural agencies has become a person interacting with other persons (concrete human beings)» (39). Cf. Rucker. We must however grant what Christine Korsgaard asserts: «The identity of a person, of an agent, is not the same as the identity of the human animal on whom the person normally supervenes. I believe that human beings differ from the other animals in an important way. We are self-conscious in a particular way: we are conscious of the grounds on which we act, and therefore are in control of them» (19). Though the identity of the human self cannot be immediately identified with that of the human organism, the self *is* the organism insofar as the organism has undergone a transformation as a result of enculturation, a transformation encompassing what Korsgaard stresses (a apparently unique form of self-consciousness or reflexivity).

² It is, as Korsgaard suggests, «essential to the concept of action that it is attributable to the person as a whole, as a unit, not to some force [or, for that matter, some mechanism] that is working in her or on her» (2011, xii).

less than an ongoing initiation of the initially helpless being into a recognizably human form of life. If we are to survive as infants, our exile from a physical womb involves being enveloped by a social womb (the metaphor used by Thomas Aquinas for the family). This itself entails that the meaning of our own exertions and impulses are largely determined by the responses of others (cf. Dewey). We are not cognizant of what we are doing or even feeling or experiencing. For example, the identification of these pangs as hunger is a socially acquired skill. It is possible that we never entirely transcend this condition: as actors so often entangled in situations outstripping our comprehension no less than our control, we are not fully cognizant of what we are doing, experiencing or even feeling. The results of our actions often mock our intentions. Our appraisals of situations are not infrequently shown by the ongoing course of our situated entanglements to be misguided or mistaken. The limits of our understanding and control are revealed to us, time and again, in the course of our own lives. Our failure – or refusal – to acknowledge these limits is, at least, one source of tragedy, one of the principal reasons why human existence is so often a tragic affair.

The phenomenon of self-deception – at least, self-misunderstanding – is, consequently, critical for comprehending the reality of our self-constitution.³ In Oedipus, we have dramatically juxtaposed the blindness of the sighted, arrogant monarch and the insight of the blinded, disgraced figure. Our most disfiguring wounds are frequently self-inflicted ones. But these wounds are as often the most critical sources of our self-knowledge. In any event, the infant is not cognizant of the meaning of its own exertions and experiences. Arguably, the human animal is always to some extent a social actor who, even in its undeniable maturity, remains oblivious to much about itself and the situations in which it is implicated.

Our agency is at once constitutive and social, in a deeper sense than is ordinarily acknowledged or appreciated. Our actions do not merely reveal who we are. They constitute our agency (cf. Dewey; also Korsgaard). The seemingly unavoidable assumption of an antecedently operative agency is, in an important respect, misleading. At a certain point in the maturation of humans, there is certainly reason to see actions flowing from agents whose identities are far from indeterminate. Such actions reveal the character of the agent; at the same time, however, they go some distance in constituting that character, if only by solidifying tendencies or habits already in place. So, the opposite of action as self-disclosive must be duly considered: our actions do not so much flow from our agency (and thereby disclose the character or identity of that agency) as they *constitute* the very identity of that agency. In other words, actions are self-constitutive, not simply self-revelatory. There is at least this much truth in Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that there is no doer behind the deed. The self, as agent, is not antecedently given; s/he is rather historically emergent. The emergence of the human self, precisely in its recognizable form as a social actor (hence a communicative being), depends more than anything else on exertions, expressions, and undertakings - in a word, on *ac-*

³ «Because human beings are self-conscious, we are conscious of threats to our psychic unity» (Korsgaard, 26).

tions. The human organism as a potential self is given; the human self as an organic unity (or integrated identity) is, however, achieved.

Just as it is important to insist that action is constitutive of agency, so it is important to maintain that sociality is integral to agency. We are the authors of our own actions and we take ourselves to be such in large part because we are taken by others to be accountable for those actions. Beyond this, we are to a far greater degree than we typically are disposed to acknowledge not so much the sole authors as the *co-authors* of our actions. Human action is a concerted affair. Arresting solos of singular voices ordinarily take place alongside of various other voices, so that the solo is at once an individual and a communal achievement. Such a conception of authorship does not eradicate individual loci of moral responsibility, though it does hold open the omnipresent possibility of conjoint responsibility. Human action is, hence, both self-constitutive (constitutive of the self *as a self*) and other-dependent (dependent especially on other human agents in their irreducible otherness)

When I (for example) speak, there is ineluctably a multiplicity of voices speaking through me. The unity of the self is never more than a patchwork and partial achievement, the univocity of any speaker is almost always an auditory illusion. Even so, we have difficulty in accepting the extent to which others are constitutive of my agency, not only the emergence but also sustaining of such agency. There are psychological, moral, and ideological reasons why this is so. Notwithstanding these reasons or factors, there are compelling reasons to conceive human agents as social actors whose very agency is bound up with their sociality.

The sociality of the self however does not preclude its inwardness. It is, in truth, a necessary condition for the distinctive inwardness of human actors. Part of the difficulty here is, however, doing justice to this inwardness without lapsing into some form of Cartesianism. In this context, *Cartesianism* designates the position that privileges first-person cognition. In its most extreme form, what I think I know is equivalent to what I know (i.e., what I can rightfully claim to know). What I know first and foremost are the contents of my own consciousness. What I know about the world, either as a locus of physical objects or an arena of other rational agents, is derived from what I know *in my own case*. Self-knowledge is primary and, thus, privileged, hence all other forms of knowledge are derivative. Indeed, in comparison with the certainty of my self-knowledge, my knowledge of an external world and other minds is, at least initially, problematic. These other forms of knowledge must trace their certainty to the certitude of self-knowledge. The self in question here is in effect (if not also by avowal) originally⁴ disembodied, unsituated, solitary, and theoretical. The relationship to its own body is taken, at least at the outset, to be contingent. In being dissociated from its own body, however, the self is effectively removed from the world. As such, the self cannot but be solitary. Finally, the Cartesian self is the theoretical knower committed to the attainment of absolute certainty. In the quest for such certainty, the self as knower em-

⁴ This self however struggles desperately to recover its body and the world. It is far from certain whether a self shorn of embodiment and worldliness can recover either – indeed whether such a self can even *be* a self.

loys a method of universal, hyperbolic doubt. What René Descartes would never doubt in the sphere of human action he presumes not only the right but also the responsibility to doubt – and indeed, the very possibility of doubting in the context of purely theoretical inquiry (cf. Williams) – as though theoretical inquiry is not a sustained form of human action! In contrast to the Cartesian subject, the pragmatic self is an embodied, situated (or worldly), social actor. Theoretical inquiry from a pragmatist perspective is a human practice, hence a historically evolved and evolving affair. It is, moreover, a communal and (in its most exalted forms) intergenerational undertaking.

From this perspective, the human self is not identifiable with a thinking thing (certainly not with a disembodied consciousness), but with a living organism whose very life in its earliest years depends upon the solicitude and nurturance of other human beings. For such a being, experience is not subcutaneous or private (cf. Dewey): it is first and foremost what takes place *between* an irrepressibly active being and diversely responsive environment. The self is forged in and through its interactions and relationships to others, especially its attachments and aversions. This emphasis on the transactional dimension of human experience (what goes on between the self and the world, especially other selves) does not necessitate denying the «interior» life of such social actors. But the challenge is how to understand properly our interiority or inwardness (cf. Colapietro 1989, Chapter 5). Interiority, properly understood, involves the complex interplay between sentience and sapience. In their most rudimentary senses, *sentience* means the capacity to feel, whereas *sapience* signifies the capacity to discern differences and likenesses, especially ones relevant to the execution and success of an activity (e.g., the efforts of earthworms to construct domiciles) (cf. Crist). The inner life of human beings however involves a spontaneous⁵ reflexivity (e.g., we get angry at ourselves for becoming angry or ashamed of ourselves for allowing ourselves to be shamed or proud of ourselves for being humble or humiliated for feeling so proud). But this interiority is unique only to the extent that it is transformed by reflexivity, while our reflexivity is attainable only as a result of our sociality (our lives being so incessantly and profoundly one with others – in short, *our being with others*).

The acquisition of new habits is a hallmark of countless organisms. This capacity is, at least, partly constitutive of sapience in its most rudimentary form.⁶ Intelligence, understood as the capacity to learn from experience, presupposes the capacity of organisms to alter their habits. «Worms possess an inborn [or innate] drive to plug holes; their intelligence consists in acting on the basis of the shapes of objects; yet over time, they acquire habits according to which they tend to behave» (Crist, 5), habits demonstrably different from their instinctual tendencies or

⁵ It also involves a deliberate or cultivated reflexivity, but this form has its roots in the more spontaneous forms of human reflexivity.

⁶ «Darwin was ultimately compelled», Eileen Crist recounts, «to admit that earthworms use judgments about the best way to pull leaves into their burrows [or domiciles] – that they feel the shape of the leaves prior to grasping them. Darwin described this capacity of judgment based on tactile sense as showing “some degree of intelligence” (1881/1985, 91)» (4). This suggests, at the very least, the interplay between sapience and sentience or, quite possibly, how sapience shades into sentience (in other words, how even quite elementary forms of sentience function as sapiential force).

dispositions. So, even worms display not only instinctual intelligence (the capacity to discern differences and likenesses relevant to the task of constructing their burrows), but also the innate capacity to modify their habits to execute this vital task in response to novel differences (e.g., the modification of their behavior in response to leaves not indigenous to the region in which the worms have evolved and thereby adapted themselves).

The efficacy and indeed nobility of symbolic intelligence cannot be gainsaid. But this capacity and the inner, or reflexive, life it makes possible are only the far distant relatives of the observable traits of far more humble creatures⁷. Interiority enhanced and indeed transformed by reflexivity is a late development in evolutionary history. The interior lives of animals operating at a great distance from the *reflexive* interiority characteristic of the human animal help us to discern our affinity to far simpler organisms but also the dramatic divide between our interiority and theirs.

For this purpose, a contemporary text provides an invaluable resource⁸. Eileen Crist has written an essay entitled «The inner life of earthworms: Darwin's argument and its implications» (2002). It is truly a fascinating piece. As the subtitle suggests, it takes its point of departure from the work of the Charles Darwin. Even quite literate individuals often do not know that Darwin took this lowly organism to be, from an evolutionary perspective, of immense significance (see, however, Phillips). Earthworms transformed much of the surface of the Earth, in such a way as to facilitate the emergence of other species, far more complex in anatomical structure and, hence, physiological capabilities. Since the ascription of sentience (the capacity to feel in some fashion and degree) to earthworms might seem problematic to many observers or theorists, the attribution of intelligence appears even more so. (Though there is an intimate, complex connection between sentience and sapience or intelligence, I cannot do more than touch upon this connection here). Crist is however inclined to make the case for ascribing intelligence to this species of animals (see especially the section of her essay entitled «The Intelligence of earthworms», 3-5). In this context, *intelligence* means the ability to learn from experience, that is, from the situations into which the life of an organism, simply by virtue of its irrepressible activity and ineradicable needs, is thrown. Accordingly, earthworms exhibit the ability to discern shape and to respond differentially to different shapes (Crist 2002, 4). Herein we can discern the root of intelligence, in its most rudimentary guise.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening ones of the twenty-first, scientists and theorists more generally have been urging a reappraisal of animality. This widespread tendency stands in marked contrast to the traditional dissociation of the human animal from all other species.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century much philosophical ingenuity was expended addressing the problem of other minds. In the opening decades of this

⁷ Part of the genius of Darwin is evident in the painstaking care with which he conducted minute observations of the activities of earthworms.

⁸ Crist's essay is however a celebration of Darwin's study of earthworms, so there might be something misleading about laying too much stress on the contemporaneity of her text.

century especially, much is spent probing questions concerning animal intelligence. The chasm yawning between my own mind and that of other *human* minds was presumed to be so wide as to pose a problem of a seemingly intractable character. The threat of not only skepticism but also solipsism was taken to be unavoidable: this threat must be confronted, otherwise one was judged to have begged an important (or pressing) question. (see, e.g., Findlay on Wittgenstein's obsession with solipsism). The gulf between one human mind and another was taken to be so great that the very ascription of mind to humans other than oneself was, consequently, taken to be problematic. The residual Cartesianism was rarely noted, let alone challenged. The privileged position of first-person avowals made the commonplace ascription of second-person predicates (e.g., «Why are you angry?») problematic. In contrast, we tend to take the kinship between human animals and countless other species to be so deep and intimate that speciesism is plausibly alleged as a prejudice analogous to racism and sexism (Peter Singer).

All of this bears directly, if not obviously, upon questions of selfhood. A being who can respond to the utterance of its own name would seem to be a candidate for selfhood. Ask any dog or cat «owner», though such an individual is likely to conceive of their relationship to their companion not principally (if at all) in terms of possession or ownership. The meaning of *interpellation* has, for understandable reasons, been construed rather narrowly, so that hailing someone is immediately taken to be an instance of constituting an individual *as a subject*. To be hailed by others, especially those in institutionally accredited roles of authority, is, upon this narrow construal, to be implicated in a regime of power and, by virtue of that, to be constituted as a subject of this sort (e.g., a woman in the context of patriarchy) (see, of course, Althusser). Being hailed by a generic term (e.g., «Mademoiselle» or «Sir») is one thing, being called by one's proper name ordinarily quite another; however, it is often the case that addresses by a generic term or one's proper name serve the same ideological function (the re-inscription of the individual in the relationships of power, as they are culturally inscribed and sanctioned). While it never takes place outside the meshes of ideology, interpellation can be envisioned more broadly to designate the act or process of simply being hailed by another (of being addressed by another). The response of others to one's own individuality is partly constitutive of both selfhood and, more fundamentally, of individuality. Indeed, both individuality and selfhood are *relational* terms: the relationship to others is integral to the *designata* of both words.

Individuality is, however, more primordial and pervasive than selfhood. While all selves are individuals, not all individuals are selves. Even two peas in a pod are not absolutely identical (cf. Dewey, «Time and Individuality»): *this* pea is different from *that* one in discoverable respects, no matter how manifestly alike they are at first blush or even upon closer examination. John Dewey helpfully suggests that: «Individuality is inexpugnable because it is a manner of distinctive sensitivity, selection, choice, response and utilization of conditions» (*LW* 5, 121).

The «inner» life of human beings, understood as social actors, is for the most part inseparable from their «outer» life (cf. Hampshire). In other words, reflexivity is intimately connected to sociality – the relationship of the self to itself

tightly tied to that of its relationship to others. This does not make thinking to be simply a species of talking to oneself. There may be depths and dimensions of inwardness inaccessible to others, though I (along with Wittgenstein) am disposed to interrogate the meaning and bases of claims regarding these alleged features of human selfhood. The root problem here is the allegation of *invincible* interiority. In any case, the life of the self is hardly identifiable with the inwardness of that life, the fact that the self is, time and again, either thrown back upon itself or disposed to withdraw within itself.

It is not simply a pun to insist that the private dimension of human selfhood is, at least in the first instance, defined privatively, so that it points to a condition of being deprived. The private individual is that which lacks (or is deprived of) a public status or function. The very distinction between the private and the public is, however, not one drawn by each individual in an absolutely idiosyncratic manner. It is a publicly instituted distinction: who counts as a public personage and who is deprived of such status, etc., is not simply or even primarily up to individuals, in isolation from others, to decide. Of course, the distinction between the private and the public is not absolutely fixed, once and for all; but, in insisting upon this, I am not implying that this distinction is easily modifiable or even simply contingent.

The private sphere is however not necessarily an inaccessible one. It is instructive to recall R. W. Emerson's observation: «Hide your thoughts! Hide the sun and the moon. They publish themselves to the universe. They will flow out of your actions, your manners, and your face» («Literary Ethics»; quoted by James in «Emerson», *Essays in Religion & Philosophy*, 112-113).

The recurrent need for sleep is arguably an analogue for the standing exigency for privacy or solitude (the need to be alone, to withdraw from the company of others, no matter how delightful and sustaining their companionship is). The negative facet of privacy makes possible its positive function: to be cut off or withdrawn from, however temporarily and (in most cases) partially, from others makes possible for the self to take a stance toward itself. For example, the self in the face of harsh, unrelenting criticism might assume a stance of private rebellion: «I am *not* that person». This is indeed a complex example, since in this instance the stance of the self toward itself is prompted by the utterances of another.

There is no necessity that others drive the self into its own interiority. The self might be temperamentally reclusive or withdrawn. Whatever the sources of its motivation to withdraw from the public sphere, into the private one, what is critical is a more or less integrated set of reflexive functions or abilities. These reflexive functions are not only acquired capacities of a social animal but also *socially* acquired skills. The social self is not defined primarily in terms of its interiority or inwardness; rather this irreducible interiority is explicable only in reference to the instinctual sociality of the human animal. Contra George Santayana, this does not reduce the human self to a social function; it does however entail seeing the human self as a relational being, though hardly an agent reducible to any of its relationship to others (even the totality of these relationships). For the social relationships of the individual self are always, to some extent, refracted through the prism

of reflexivity (the nexūs of relationships of the self to itself). The reflexive functions of this social self are, however, ones that trace their origin to social interactions and, moreover, sustain their operation by the support, example, and even opposition of other selves.

The «inner» life of the human self, in its standing as a social actor, is an expansive network of reflexive relationships, but relationships established, maintained, and altered principally in the crucible of social relationships. This hardly makes this life epiphenomenal or insignificant. The capacity of a social agent to keep its own company, to assert its own worth, to praise or denounce itself, scarcely loses its efficacy or importance because it is derived rather than innate, dependent on social ties rather than an insular interiority.

In one of the essays by Emerson from which I have already quoted, however, he rather surprisingly suggests: «... real action is in silent moments. The epochs of our life are not in the visible facts of our choice of a calling, our marriage, our acquisition of an office, and the like, but in a silent thought by the wayside as we walk; in a thought which revises our entire manner of life ...» («Spiritual Laws» in *Selected Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, 320). What are we to make of this? Is the inner life of social selves, in the final analysis, truly to be found in such an invincible interiority, such an innermost silence? If we trace the trajectory of the thought being articulated by Emerson here, we will discover something surprising. The accompanying commentary and critique to which Emerson points in this passage is inseparable from its revisory function. Let us retrace our steps slowly and, then, move beyond the point where we were: «The epochs of our life ... are in a silent thought by the wayside as we walk; in a thought which *revises* our entire manner of life and says – “Thus hast thou done, but it were better thus”. And all our after years, like menials, serve and wait on this, and according to their ability execute its will» (Atkinson [ed.] 320; emphasis added). The relation of the self to itself (the inner life envisioned precisely as a reflexive life) acquires and sustains its meaning and force in the relationship of the self to the world, above all, to other social actors. The «visible facts of our choice of a calling, our marriage, our acquisition of an office, and the like» are far from negligible or even secondary. But, for example, *my* choice of a calling possesses its singular meaning by virtue of reflexivity: I chose this profession because I identify with a familial tradition and want to carry on an intergenerational commitment of esteemed elders. Or I chose this calling as an act of rebellion against such a tradition. What I am doing when I chose a calling is, accordingly, impossible to ascertain apart from «a silent thought [or, more likely, ongoing sequence of silent thoughts] by the wayside as we walk». The significance of the sequence of such thoughts is, however, to be found in their revisory function. What such a sequence allows us to revise is nothing less than «our entire manner of life». That is, the reflexive function is perforce a revisory one, at least, the reflexive function enables revisory acts – «I have acted thus, but it would have been better had I acted otherwise» (cf. Peirce 1905). The reflexive function of self-criticism enables the reflexive function of self-control. The latter is often guided by an ideal of self, wherein the potentially centrifugal forces of a singular life are counteracted by the centripetal force of a unifying ideal (again, cf. Peirce).

This ideal provides the means by which the self can gather its disparate impulses and diverse roles into an integral whole, a unified agency. Total integration or a completely unified self is however unattainable.

Emerson articulates in the passage already quoted, as he does in countless other ones, an ideal of unity («there are no thorough lights, but the eye of the beholder is puzzled, detecting many unlike tendencies, and *a life not yet at ones*») (321; emphasis added). While a minimal measure of functional unity is necessary for any being to act, the ideal of unity, whether advocated in reference to selves or communities, needs to be interrogated more radically than it historically has been interrogated. Unity is neither as necessary nor as desirable as traditional philosophy has claimed.

The human animal is first and foremost a social actor, a being whose agency and sociality are so thoroughly interwoven as to form a single fabric. Social agency is accordingly the most recognizable face of the human actor; and such agency manifests itself in expression and communication. The social agency of the human animal is, however, ineluctably a reflexive affair. Thus the self must be understood in reference to reflexivity no less than agency and sociality. This makes of our «inner» lives principally an ongoing process in which reflexive functions exert a corrective control over even the seemingly spontaneous exertions of our irrepressible agency.

A reflexive being such as a human self cannot but be a divided being (cf. Larmore). Insofar as it is present, unity – the unity of the self – is an attainment. Insofar as the self is envisioned in its totality, the ideal of unity is not one to be endorsed uncritically or unqualifiedly. The self is always to some extent a patchwork, even a crazy quilt. As virtually all other ideals, that of unity can operate in a tyrannical and hence destructive manner.

We are irrepressible actors. We are from the first breath we draw social actors (cf. Dewey), though the social dimension of our irrepressible agency is hardly anything about which we have for the earliest «epochs» of our lives any explicit consciousness. The distinctive character of our social agency encompasses an expansive array of reflexive abilities and tendencies, not the least of which is our capacity for self-criticism and self-correction («Thus has thou done, but it were better thus»). While the accent must fall simultaneously on agency, sociality, and agency, the challenging task of articulating an adequate account of human selfhood requires us to show how each of these facets is linked to the other two. If I have done anything here to render this somewhat plausible, then my efforts will have been successful.

More than anything else, then, mechanistic reductionism (especially in the culturally celebrated form of neuroscience) and residual Cartesianism (especially in the disguised form of unquestionable first-person authority) stand in the way of doing justice to the full range of relevant phenomena. At the intersection of some of the most important currents of contemporary thought, however, an arresting portrait of the human self as a social actor opens the way to doing fuller justice to the full range of these pertinent phenomena. Much of the ink spilled on the self obscures or occludes just these phenomena. But much of what has been written

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on this topic marks pathways to clearings wherein the human self in its true character becomes discoverable.

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