

‘To Be Oneself’ – ‘To Be Beside Oneself’

Reflexes in Language of the Notion of ‘Self’

by

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AMONG linguistic expressions, there is a category which, at first sight, is strangely contradictory. It is the one that indicates the differing inner attitudes and actions of man towards himself, that is, those of a “reflexive” character. What seems contradictory is precisely the various conceptions or evaluations of the element which, in these locutions, is represented by the reflexive pronoun. On the one hand, one is blamed for showing “self-complacency” or “self-assertion,” for “self-praise” or “self-sufficiency”; while on the other one is lauded for being capable of “self-examination” or “self-control”—or even of “self-sacrifice,” “self-forgetfulness” or “self-effacement.” These two groups of locutions have one thing in common, namely that, in the spirit of those who use them, the “self” which is the object of the attitude has a *negative* character. For if this “self” is considered to cause harm or annoyance to its environment in loving and asserting itself and, consequently, ought to be examined, controlled, and even sacrificed or effaced, it can hardly represent a positive thing in itself. On the other hand, however, it is deeply inscribed in our consciousness that, in order to be worthy of our human state, we should have “self-respect” and a sound “self-confidence” and, inversely, that we should do our utmost to avoid “despising” or “debasement” “ourselves.” Now according to the spirit of these last two groups of locutions, the “self” as such is eminently *positive*.

These apparent contradictions are explicable only by admitting that, in the depths of his soul, man is conscious of having, as it were, *two* selves which in a certain way are contrary to each other. One of them is easy to grasp: the one which is composed of a body and a soul and which lives in and by the interminable and changing experiences man has of his physical environment. The group of attitudes first mentioned above, that of the type “self-complacency” or “self-assertion,” undoubtedly presupposes that one wants to identify oneself naively with this outward-turning self; that one accepts in advance, as something self-evident, the legitimacy of its claims and its supposed goodness; and this involves a corresponding blindness and deafness towards other empirical selves. As to our second group, that of the type “self-command,” “self-sacrifice,” etc., these inward attitudes or actions evidently aim at the same self, but with the intention of keeping aloof from it, and of putting it in its rightful place.

Now since, in this last group of locutions, the empirical self plays the part of object with regard to the attitude in question, it cannot also be its subject.¹ This function must belong to an element which is essentially separated from the outer self, but which nevertheless also is—“itself.” Thereby we draw near to the other self understood in everyday language, but then we are faced with a paradox, namely that two different elements claim the same name of “self.” It is impossible to remain passive in the face of this paradox, as obviously it touches essential aspects of our personal life; and the only reasonable solution of this dilemma—oneself and yet not oneself—is to admit, not really two selves absolutely separated from each other—which would be absurd—but two “sides,” one outward and the other inward, of the same self.

Now it is evident that the nature and function of the “inner side,” the one that commands, etc., require—to say the least—that there the self in question should realize itself more adequately and perfectly than on the “outer side,” the one that is commanded; it ought even to recover, there, its *real* resources of judgment and force. It is equally a matter of course that, in *one* of the inverse directions, there must be a discontinuity, a rupture of connection, between the two sides, for if not, these could not, in our daily experience, appear respectively either as the support or the object of our differing attitudes towards ourselves. And the side from whose standpoint the connection with the other is broken should reasonably be the one that is commanded, etc.—or forgotten—by its “partner.” For, in order to be able to command—or to forget²—one must needs have knowledge of the object in question; on the other hand, one does not know anything whatsoever without there being a current of consciousness going from subject to object, that is, a continuity in that direction. In return, the self³ which is commanded or forgotten ought, in the first place, to be passive, to play the part of object. It is only *a posteriori* that a current of conscience goes from that self to its antipode, and then as a reflex—or rather a reflux: *a priori*, this antipode appears—from the limited point of view of the outward self—as the totally Other, as the invisible, unknown and sovereign Witness⁴

¹ “What could begin to deny [empirical] self, if there were not something in man different from self?” (William Law, cited from *Studies in Comp. Rel.*, Aut. 1975, p. 226).

² In ordinary language, “self-forgetfulness” is synonymous with “altruism” placing one’s own interest behind that of others, that is, sacrificing oneself. In itself, however, “self-forgetfulness” might also exceed the volitive sphere and indicate, not a moral attitude but an intellectual state, in the deepest sense of the word. In this case, to forget oneself would practically be the same as to remember the Beyond—with all the spiritual implications that this last expression may have.

³ Here and below, we again postulate the existence of two different selves, as this is in accordance with the everyday experience, from which our article sets out.

⁴ In borrowing an image which is often used by Frithjof Schuon, one might, in this respect, compare the two selves to the spider and to the fly that has let itself be captured in the spider’s net: it is the latter which—at least *a priori*—is conscious of the fly, and not inversely; and this consciousness is symbolized by the threads which, like the radii of a circle, go out from the center occupied by the spider, whereas the

In contradiction from this group of locutions, the other group that has the outer self as object, namely of the type “self-assertion” or “self-love,” presupposes that this same self is equally the subject of the attitudes referred to. If this is absurd, it is because these attitudes *are* absurd or illusory: it shows no sense of reality to think that any single one of all the selves of the world could be self-sufficient and, consequently, could merit being asserted or loved for its own sake.

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Let us then, against the background of these considerations, examine the two other types of locutions mentioned above, those according to which the self has a positive value as such. These are, on the one hand, the type “self-respect” or “self-confidence”⁵, and on the other the type “self-contempt” or “self-abasement.” The object of these attitudes ought to be the inward or higher self, for otherwise it would not be good to respect it and put one’s confidence in it, nor bad to despise or abase it. But which element can be its subject if it is true, as we have just stated, that the outer self as such is passive and plays only the part of object? In fact, of the two selves it is only the hidden or inner one which *a priori* has light and warmth, though nevertheless the apparent, empirical self has a relative independence and power of initiative, to the extent that it can either accept or reject the “warm light”—or the “luminous warmth”⁶—that constantly flows from its antipode. If it has an open attitude, it is filled with respect and confidence towards this source of light, and is conscious of it; but if, on the contrary, the outward self rejects the light, it shuts itself up in a “cold obscurity” which is nothing other than self-contempt or self-abasement.⁷ On the other hand, the fact that the empirical self can take this either positive or negative attitude towards the source of spiritual light and warmth proves that it is already potentially conscious of it, that it participates, by reflection, in its nature.

The attitude of consciously excluding the light signifies a revolt or subversion; it is like a fall into an abyss and is accompanied, in its ultimate stages, by despair. But there is a less advanced degree of this moral development, characterized by unawareness of reality, by

unconsciousness of the fly regarding this center is represented by the concentric threads, that is, by a discontinuity vis-à-vis the spider.

⁵ Among the locutions of this group one might also include that of “self-love”; for this may of course be referred to the inward core of the human person, just as much as to its outward shell. In this case, it identifies itself with the love to which—according to the biblical commandment—the love of our neighbor ought to be equal.

⁶ These expressions come from Frithjof Schuon.

⁷ Basically, this oppositional reaction is only a reflux of the current of “warm light,” which has assumed a “polluted” character by the very act of revolt. This is what Meister Eckhart—in connecting it with the Source of all light—characterizes in the following way: “Even the one who blasphemes, praises God.”

the spiritual state that the locution basically signifies⁸: in moments of relaxation, for instance in the lap of nature, the psychic elements imposed, willy-nilly, upon us by “civilization” suddenly sink to the ground like a dead shell or a slough, and we can at last respire... Logically, this experience should in its turn lead man to the conclusion that there is in him a something which—by desire or by passivity—favors the adhering of all these foreign elements to his soul; and that this is precisely the empirical self: this, in fact, is exterior to our true personality, in exactly the same way as the external elements which it appropriates.

Everyday language, for its part, is logical—or complete—by offering another expression which, like the last-mentioned, indicates a state and not an attitude; but contrary to these, it is a state of extreme *removal* from the inner self. It is the locution “to be beside oneself,” by which one means to say that some disorderly emotion—a dispersing wrath, or a despair, or an unbridled and self-centered joy—has deprived somebody of all self-control. This state is evidently antipodal to that of self-realization, and so, the locution by which it is expressed might theoretically have a general meaning according to which it would indicate the result of every centrifugal tendency of the soul, of every surrender to the outer self. Taken in this sense, it would be the state of soul described by Christ in the image of the “house” of the “children of Jerusalem”: this, he says, will be “abandoned and desolate,” despite his reiterated efforts to “gather” its inhabitants, “even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings” (Matthew 23:37-38).⁹

Christ has this “gathering” function—from the collective as well as the personal point of view—by the fact that he is, so to speak, the “inner Self” of Christianity; and from the universal point of view, he has the same function, towards the whole of Creation, in his capacity of Logos: “No man cometh unto the Father, but by me”¹⁰. In these words is indicated what is the ultimate Source of the human self: the divine Self—the only one which is self-sufficient and by virtue of which man has the power to command himself and the right to be self-confident.

⁸ “This distinguishing between the two selves, the Inner Self...and the outer contingent self is reflected in our linguistic heritage. We speak of people being ‘self-controlled,’ and admonish one another to ‘be yourself’; we speak of saints as being, not ‘at war with themselves’ but rather as ‘being at peace with themselves’” (Rama P. Coomaraswamy, “The Bhagavad Gita,” in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1976, p. 183).

⁹ Sublime wisdom is often reflected in popular locutions; that is why, in connection with the words of Christ, we dare cite the German expression *aus dem Hauschen sein*, “to be out of one’s little house,” which is used as a figurative synonym of *ausser sich sein*, “to be beside oneself.”

¹⁰ John 14:6. In another of his images, Christ depicts the negative antipode of this universal “inner Self”; it is the image of “outer darkness” (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). This may be said to constitute the macrocosmic analogy of the “house abandoned and desolate” of the “children of Jerusalem.”

What is life? It is a flash of firefly in the night. It is a breath of a buffalo in the winter time. It is as the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Chief Isapwo Muksika Crowfoot