

THE PRIZE OF SELF REFLECTION

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It goes without saying that thinking and action go hand and hand (Keating, 1990). Thinking is shaped in great measure by the world in which we reside. If the people around us continually communicate disappointment in us, eventually we are going to think of ourselves in negative and discouraging tones. Moreover, because thoughts and action go hand and hand, our thinking about ourselves, our self reflection, learned originally in a variety of social contexts, will lead to behavior that others will not only witness but assess.

Stephen Kemmis (1985) makes these same points when he states, somewhat surprisingly, that self reflection is not purely an internal process but a social one, and that a culture's ideology ultimately shapes our (seemingly personal) reflections in the same way that our self reflections shape ideology, even though one rarely contemplates this notion. Reflection, Kemmis notes, isn't something that goes on only in one's head. In reflection, one surely looks inward, as John Dewey (1991) too, suggested, but one looks outward as well, for it is the social order that ultimately determines the products of reflection and hence the action taken by each of us as a result of (ostensibly personal) reflection.

Thinking about thinking, what psychologists refer to as meta-psychology, essentially commences during adolescence. Indeed, much of adolescence is about the process of "going meta," in which young people become prepared to undertake the act of self reflection, as Robert Tremmel (1993) notes, and ideally make judgments about their thinking prior to acting. The training for this action was begun in childhood, in what Jean Piaget termed preconventional reasoning (Revenson & Singer, 1974). That is, the child does something to avoid punishment, or simply because a powerful authority figure has directed his or her actions. In contrast, adolescents reflect and reason, often in the most complex forms of which human beings are capable. A young man decides he needs a new shirt so he plans to go shopping. Then he looks back at his thoughts and actions and makes further judgments not only upon these thoughts but upon the actions and affects they may have on others. This is quintessential self reflection of a sort

rarely undertaken by people before the commencement of adolescence. Upon purchasing the shirt, the young man fears he may have spent too much money, or he concludes that the store is over priced and that he must never again shop there, or perhaps he believes he has insulted the salesperson. Whatever the considerations, they only spring forth when one is acting in a self reflective manner.

Kemmis further notes that as the individual undertakes purposeful self reflection in both thought and action, all three of Aristotle's fundamental modes of reasoning reveal themselves (McKeon, 1941). Every thought and action, for example, must contain what Aristotle called the technical or instrumental form of reasoning. There are always means and ends, and both must be considered and judged. In order to get an A in the course, the students will have to additional research papers. Do they want to do this writing? Do they crave an outstanding grade that intensely? The purpose of what the adolescent is thinking and doing, and what might emerge as the practical result or product of this thinking, remain fundamental concerns in instrumental reasoning. Technical reasoning is also the foundation of a person's need to control natural powers, the way one imagines one is doing by endlessly listening to weather forecasts.

Second, there is what Aristotle called the practical aspect of thinking and acting. In this form of thought, people consider how they will judge thinking and acting. Will they, for example, act rightly or wrongly given the nature of historical events or existing social circumstances? Will they reflect on the moral way to conduct themselves? Without practical deliberation, there will never be anything resembling a conscience.

Finally, there is theoretical reasoning, or what Aristotle called speculation and the pursuit of truth for its own sake. And here we must pause for we have come to a critical juncture in our discussion of self reflection.

In reflecting on theoretical reasoning or speculation, we might well ask why anyone would occupy themselves with the notion of self reflection or consider Aristotle's notion of the pursuit of truth for its own sake? We do so because in Kemmis's words, we hope to understand how the people may

“achieve emancipation from irrationality, injustice and social fragmentation” (Kemmis, 1985, page 142). We contemplate these notions, in other words, to create a template that might allow us to free our minds from enslavement precisely as John Dewey (1991) advised, and equally important, free ourselves from the societal powers that push us toward unjust values, immorality, and irrational if not openly self deceptive behavior, (Cottle, 2000) which in turn causes us to feel isolated, fragmented, alienated, lonely, painfully dissatisfied and alas, distracted. Given the nature of our global culture, we already notice, as Benjamin Barber (1999, page A23) writes, that “identities are compromised and lost and our sense of concrete temporality and fixed place, hence our essential security—social, familial and personal—is put permanently at risk.”

If this were not sufficiently convincing, consider that self-reflective people, as Kemmis points out, are people aware of how history has affected them, and how they in turn affect history. There is nothing utopian about this notion; Aristotle observed it centuries ago, and one imagines that each of us understands it as well, as each of us periodically reflects on the nature of the self in society. Each of us, in other words, lives with the residues of the dilemmas Erik Erikson (1968) postulated for the adolescent. We recall Erikson’s rather remarkable terminology for the adolescent stage on the (psychosocial) life cycle: Identity cohesion (the self) versus role confusion (the society and culture).

All of us appreciate, to some extent, the role of our culture’s history as well as our own personal history in shaping what we define as our selves. All of us appreciate moreover, what emerges as cultural misunderstandings, prejudice or outright injustice; we seem to be born with a keen sense for what is fair and unfair (Damon, 1988). For us to become self reflective is to reach a point where we recognize we make a difference, we matter, and in so doing we discover the power of identity, as Erikson espoused it, along with a genuine sense of purpose and possibility. Not only do we matter to ourselves, but moment by moment through our self-reflective thought and action, we recognize that at all moments we are part of the creation of the world.

No longer mere consumers, members of some giant audience, classroom or bureaucracy, nor passive observers passively awaiting our destinies, self

reflection helps us to become participants, shapers, creators, artists. We question decisions, decision making and decision makers, precisely as we were told to do in most every graduation ceremony speech, just as we question communication, communications and communicators. In a self reflective mode, we study well the message as well as the messenger.

We do this in part by recognizing that a culture's power contained in its values and belief systems, and ultimately its history and ideologies, has no more power to shape our thoughts and actions than we ourselves, through (self-reflective) thought and action, have power to shape these very same values and ideologies, this very same history. We may wish to be a member of the club or clique, the crowd or team, but we will never allow ourselves to be owned by the crowd; free will and disciplined self reflection ought to preclude this. As Paulo Friere (1970) observed, inasmuch as reality is a construction, each of us has the capacity to transform it. Which in turn suggests, as Kemmis too, asserted, that reflection is a form of ideology. For all we know the very concept of childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age may be just a string of ideological constructions.

If the world constructs our thoughts and actions, our language and communication, our ideas and the ways we perceive and comprehend things, then we in turn maintain the power to shape and reconstitute the world. Each exercise in self-reflection, as Kemmis observed, makes possible a reconstituting of oneself as well as one's social world. This means that anyone of us can invent and reinvent ourselves, anyone of us can live freely in a sphere beyond the actual, (a sphere, sadly, some now imagine is made possible only through the use of drugs,) the sphere, as Herbert Marcuse (1964) noted, of the possible.

The possible, however, is there for the taking only if we shed our distractive or undisciplined thought and action in favor of self-reflective thought and action. When unself-reflective, we merely consume what has been fed to us by the culture in our homes and schools, in political realms, in the malls, theaters, restaurants and anywhere else we hang out, because the culture's agents recognize that we continue to consume these (distracting) products and ideologies. Through self reflection, however, we come to recognize that others

often see us as nothing but members of some group or crowd. Yet we all seek individual recognition; we do not wish to be known merely as kids, parents, workers, the elderly. Granted, to consume the products and ideologies of the culture is to know periodic sensations of self fulfillment, what Dewey (1991) called the satisfaction of appetite, sensation and appeal to momentary circumstance, but it is never to know the experience of genuine fulfillment, satisfaction and liberty.

By transforming one's identity, one's decision making, one's thinking and actions, what popular culture itself calls reinventing oneself—a far cry from the notion of “marketing” oneself—anyone of us may change the culture's products and ideologies. More significant than merely banding together as an enormous consumer group and choosing to boycott certain products, this action transforms these products, and their attending ideologies, by nature of our most private thoughts leading ultimately to the most public of action. Again from Kemmis (1985, page 145): “The emancipatory interest is aimed at emancipating people from the dictates of taken-for-granted assumptions, habits, tradition, custom, domination and coercion, and self deception.”

As Friere might have asserted, we are all, not merely the young, far freer than ever we (might have let ourselves) believe, or more accurately, the culture wishes for us to believe. Self reflection, we might add, reinforces this belief, but unself-reflective thought and action prevent its birth within our minds. When we remain unself-reflective, we honestly imagine that many things about life remain forever immutable and alas, must be taken for granted, accepted. Similarly, unself-reflective thought and action often cause us to believe we have the power to control outcomes when in truth we remain totally powerless.

In the mode of self-reflective thought, we recognize that while all sorts of pressures are exerted on us to purchase products, even worship certain icons, we ourselves are neither icons nor mere products of history and contemporary society. We discover our actions need not be merely the result of habits of the mind, nor of the heart for that matter, nor unthinking repetitive social action of the sort most of us claim to abhor. We learn we are more than passive consumers or audience members; we have the power to become active thinkers and agents

recasting the fundamental visions for and forms of the culture in which we live, and not merely exist.

We learn, moreover, that we are inalterably determined neither by genetic force nor instinct (nor by the unseen hand of destiny) to the point that our entire being is established by the third year of life, or the fifth year, or even the fiftieth year. We learn that our being cannot be defined simply by the nature of our intelligences, our disabilities or disorders, all terms which in a self reflective world would go through constant re-definitions. All adolescents and adults possess the power to create a fragmented, atomized world of alienated people, many of them acting uncivilly toward one another, as one observes in certain homes, schools or work places, as millions of people skim the surface of television and computer screens as Sven Birkerts (1999) wrote, imagining that material culture will eventually yield genuine happiness.

In contrast, each of us possesses the power to formulate and then construct the social forms of solidarity that we know we require in order to feel nurtured, secure and comfortable in intimate contexts, (Earls & Carlson, 1993), and we don't always require psychotherapy to reach these goals. What can one person do? Nothing more than change their own fate and the fate of an entire world; that is, if they employ self-reflection as a means of simultaneously turning inward and outward, and so choose. Again from Stephen Kemmis (1985, page 149): "...reflection is a power we choose to exercise in the analysis and transformation of the situations in which we find ourselves when we pause to reflect. It expresses our agency as the makers of history as well as our awareness that we have been made by it."

As Freud spoke of a life force (Eros) and a death force (Thanatos), so too did Erich Fromm (1941) speak of a death oriented culture, the so-called *necrophilus* orientation, and the love oriented or *biophilus* culture. Fromm would have looked two seconds at America racing past the twenty first century starting point and claimed it was necrophilus to the nth degree. All one has to do is watch the stories dominating the nightly news to see what would have struck Fromm's eye. Incidentally, part of the necrophilus orientation, Fromm alleged, is an obsession

with law and order, which means insisting that punishment, prisons and guns stop crime, and that nature's forces can be predicted and harnessed.

None of us is alone in our struggle with the idea of life's brevity and human finitude. None of us is alone in wishing to believe that we might matter just a bit, or make a tad of difference to someone somewhere over time. Perhaps we feel we will leave our mark by continuing the family name or leaving behind some product, or as Thoreau suggested, making even meager improvement in the social conditions and the land we have inherited. We want to imagine that our conscious worlds are dominated by life and not death forces, a desire that is momentarily shattered when murder and suicide take hold of our families and schools. We wish to believe we are worthy, useful, loving, lovable, that we know the good and do the good. Perhaps we just wish to believe.

My own father claimed there was little sense working on anything unless life or death hung in the balance. Easy for him to say, he was a physician dealing with life and death on a daily basis. The rest of us just imagine our own efforts warrant life and death status. Most writers, I am certain, imagine that the unfinished book lives in them and causes the same joy and nausea as the unborn baby does for the pregnant woman. Readers must forgive a writer's self absorption and periodic self importance, for to undertake any project leading to a book gradually comes to be felt as a life or death affair; it almost can't be helped.

I'm no different; I actually have come to believe that unself-reflective thought and action represent significant facets of the death force Fromm, Marcuse, Freud, Dewey, Friere and others observed, and that self-reflection, disciplined, moral, properly judged thinking and action represent fundamental ingredients of a genuine life force (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Blasi, 1988). I honestly believe each of us can change ourselves and the world, making it more just, more rational, even more loving by dint of transformations of which we are uniquely capable in reasoning and action. Granted, luck plays a role in all of our lives, as does that mysterious conglomerate of proteins known as genetic structure.

Then there's the matter of the human will, and the choices, even the seemingly insignificant ones, each of us undertakes every moment of our life,

unless of course we are distracted. With this choice, as Dewey and Kemmis remind us, comes the possibility of a just, rational and moral life filled with satisfaction, unless of course one is distracted.

Think in this context of theories of human development. Life begins and our brains and habits form. We are told by some scientists that our brains have fully formed by three, or is it fifteen, or is it now thirty? (Does not everyone feel the maddening frustration of scientists and physicians changing their minds!) During adolescence, it is alleged, we are allowed a bit of rebellion, but by the time we reach our twenties we are meant to settle into careers (Levinson, 1978; Levinson & Levinson, 1996). By our thirties, experts suggest that if we are leading a so-called “normal life,” we have chosen a life partner. Then, following the (culturally constructed) parameters of the life cycle, all of this is elaborated in our forties and fifties so that by the time we reach sixty we can commence the psychological work required to accept our demise, reconcile the lives we have lead, and not punish ourselves too severely for roads taken or not taken, friendships and deals made or not made.

Developmental theories are often taken to be blueprints of the way life “necessarily” evolves. This piece of life business *is meant* to be accomplished by this date, that piece of life business is the ultimate act of elderly wisdom. Yet much of this is pure mental and social construction, the result of theorizing, thinking and acting, what Kemmis has called the construction of ideology. For something amazing always takes place to alter our thinking and acting. A child executes something extraordinary and we realize we do not have a secure grasp of what development or adolescence mean. We hear about thousands of people well into their fifties and sixties attending college for the first time, (Gerzon, 1966; Mezirow, 1991; Stein, 1998), or a fifty year old woman deciding that the moment is perfect for her to attend medical school. We learn of a prominent New York lawyer at age fifty nine deciding he is going to give up a lucrative practice and open an Inn in Vermont, or a seventy five year old woman who is about to fulfill her life long dream of climbing mountains in Tibet.

What is it with these people; why don't they act their age? Don't they know about the (theories of the) human life cycle and its inherent (that is,

theorized) constraints? Or we mutter, just another deviant case or mid-life crisis. A little counseling will shock them back to their senses.

All that is happening here, and it happens every moment in each of our lives, is that people are thinking and acting and hence shaping and constructing their own personal histories, as well as collective history and knowledge as well. They are constructing what too regularly we call facts--for some reason television refers to them as "factoids"--thus they are re-constructing their own identities and with them, social reality. With courage and daring and out of a sense of reasoned freedom, these people are solving complicated mathematical problems at age thirteen, or trekking in the Himalayas at age eighty. They are thinking about the dynamics of something called a mid-life crisis, something that could only have been invented in America (Sheehy, 1976; 1995), or they are recalling the writings of Ortega Y Gasset (1932) who spoke of changes in mid-life as rebirth, and of Lawrence Durrell who wrote that man (and we must add woman) is not born to lead but one life. It is all in the thinking and acting, all in the reflection, or the lack of it, the new construction or the (unthinking) settling for old structures. Do I go on as before, every one of us has asked ourselves, or do I transform myself and possibly take someone with me? It is not all in the genes, not all in human nature, not all in the hands of the fates, or the luck of the draw.

So it is not precisely how old I am or how I feel about how old I am, it is how I think and act how old I am, that eventually carries the day. I am not only the way fifteen looks, or eighty looks; I am changing the way I look and hence think about fifteen or eighty. Like all other parts of reality, including the construct of intelligence, (Gardner, 1983) age itself is but a social construct, another product of our hopefully self-reflective minds. We already think this way, what we have to do now is think about the way we think. We all know that in the eyes of children, people in their fifties and sixties seem really, really old, except of course for their own grandparents, who even in their seventies and eighties, children choose not to think about as old.

Granted, some of the ingredients of destiny (like tomorrow's weather) lie just out of reach, but the best part, as all adolescents discover, lies right inside each one of us in the form of a three pound world of mystery and possibility

known as the brain. It is the first thing we inquire about when a baby is born, but then we seem to forget that it, like the heart, requires regular, disciplined exercise, and that to a certain extent, when it comes to consciousness, thinking and reasoning, actions which neuroscience only recently has begun to comprehend, we have pretty much control. In our minds, we always have the possibility of being free—it's the one ball that never leaves our court—even immortal, if we so choose; for is this not part of our theological reflections. Children lead their lives as if everything were possible, adolescents are left to ruminate on the remains of childhood, the expectations of adulthood, and hence the possibility of possibility. Adults reflect on all of this, and more.

This is why I tend to think of self-reflection and distraction, respectively, as life and death forces. Most of share with the young the need for diversion, entertainment for the senses, gratification of certain esthetic and sensate appetites. Who doesn't like a good movie, a sumptuous dinner, a modicum of creature comforts! Yet as we have argued, the pursuit of the unself-reflective life misleads us, causes us to feel isolated, alienated, and hungry for something we can no longer describe, although many of us sense this missing fragment goes by the name of the spiritual. Working out of (mindless) habit and a belief that alas, this is what life is about and we're just going to have to accept it, a rather common admonition, incidentally, offered to adolescents, we look to the same stimuli and products to satisfy our needs and whims. Then we say, it's painful to think that after a rather young age, our cells begin to self-destruct, time is running out, and we're dying.

By now we recognize this form of thinking as unself-reflective. We don't really know that our cells are self-destructing. We don't really know that this is what life is all about. We don't really know that at a certain point we are dying rather than living. And if, in the strictest biological terms we are beginning to die the moment we are born, then it is up to us to determine what this dying business means. For could we not also allege that at the moment of birth the death cycle commences? So then by the time we learn to walk, death is well underway. What we know is what we think and how we act, what we create for ourselves and others, and what they create for us, and upon what of all of this we choose to

reflect. Having encountered the depression and despair associated with the self being blocked, and aspirations being temporarily thwarted, and recognizing the need not only for ego integrity but moral integrity as well, every period of the life cycle ideally concludes with strength; the self experiencing the joy of fulfillment forever remains a possibility (Kohut, 1978; Paladino, Jr., 2000).

The choices now present themselves to us, for there are always more moments of joy and despair, more potential prizes derived from self examination and reflection. There is also that endless line of distractions filled with glittering sights, tantalizing sounds and wondrous tastes. All one need do is look up from these pages and they will be there, or at least the instruments of these sensations will be there in the form of computers, television sets, DVD players and VCR's, Wolkmans and boom boxes, tape recorders, cell phones, and a host of stores, catalogues and web sites advertising products for the home, products for the bath, products for the skin and hair, products for the body, products for the gym, products for the day, products for the night. The instruments of sensation are also there in the form of other people, and in the form of ourselves, each one (of us) manufacturing products for the world of consciousness. Look up from these pages only if you dare.

Yet in and among these products lives the sound of a human voice. Because of my advancing age, I choose to imagine it is the voice of an elderly person, a grandparent perhaps. Think about what you just said, the voice whispers. Think about what you just did; think about what you might think or do next and what it might mean, make a reasoned judgment, then take a deep breath, reveal yourself to the world and experience the prize of reflection. In Walt Whitman's words in *To a Pupil*, "Rest not till you rivet and publish yourself of your own Personality."

It's either that, or we could stay in and rent a movie.

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