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1

On selflessness, or: Toward a new anthropology.

(For: "Alliage", Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond)

Is a selfless man one who got rid of his self, or is he a cripple born without it? Selfless people seem to live happily, so is the self an unnecessary organ, like the appendix? Is selfforgetfulness a proof that everything goes well with the self, are we reminded of it only if it hurts us? If we speak of our own self, what part of ours owns it? If we mean by "the self" the "real person", is a selfless man unreal? We say not only "myself", but also "itself", for instance "the table itself" and"the Pythagorean theorem itself": are there selfless theorems and tables? All this is obvious nonsense.

Possibly the term "self" is a nonsense. But there are selfless languages like French which invent surrogates like "soi-même" to substitute for it. Do they do so in order to imitate the nonsense their German and English neighbors indulge in? Or is it for some reason difficult to do without that nonsensical term? Or is it just a bad habit of ours? Like saying "a being", which is an undue substantivation of the auxiliary verb "to be"? The Greeks pluralize that grammatical absurdity, and they say "tà onta". Possibly to speak about "a self" is to commit a grammatical error, just like ontology is.

This is an elegant solution: every proposition containing the substantive "self" is to be eliminated, because it is grammatically faulty. We know this elegant method: is is called "logical analysis". But unfortunately we also know the objections opposed to that "neo-positivist" method: all really interesting propositions may be shown to be grammatical errors. What use is there to eliminate all ontological propositions, if ontological questions cannot be eliminated? What use is there to forbid all propositions containing the substantive "self", if we are faced with concrete problems, of which selflessness is an example? It may well be that our languages are inadequate for concrete problems, and if they do talk about them, they talk nonsense.

To give an example: if we read a thriller, we may say that we forget ourselves while reading. Of course: we may say instead that we are absorbed while reading, and thus avoid saying "self". Still: there is something we do forget while thus reading, and there is no better word for that something than "self" is. Mystics say that they dissolve themselves (their selves) within the All (or the Nothing). This "unio mystica" may not be our own concrete experience, but we must take their grammatically erroneous word for it. Which shows how inadequate language is to render concrete phenomena like this one.

To forget oneself is not to be selfless. A telephone might ring while we read the thriller, and reminds us of the self we had forgotten. (Whether mystics may thus be reminded of their own selves during "unio mystica" is a question to be answered by them.) Selflessness may be seen in the following example: somebody tries to save a child from a motor car, and is "himself" killed while trying to do so. This poses two questions: (1) Would we "ourselves" behave the same way in a similar situation? (2) Did that man really behave selflessly, or where there

some selfish motives? Both questions can have no answers. But it is senseless to pose questions that can have no answers. This shows that we can speak only nonsense when selflessness is concerned.

Let us admit that the substantive "self" is nonsensical (that it can mean no substance). To have admitted this is to have advanced an important step in our effort to face some concrete problems. A whole series of propositions like "am I a self or do I have one?" may indeed be eliminated. Which is to say that there are concrete phenomena with which to use the term "self" means to confuse them. But what about other phenomena which seem to require the use of that term? For instance: may I not say "there is a reading of a thriller", instead of saying "I forget myself while reading"? Such a "phenomenological" rendering of the concrete phenomenon is not very elegant, because our languages are not built to utter such propositions. The term "reading" in that proposition does not mean a substance, but a relation. Still: although it may not be elegant, it does not talk nonsense.

We should learn to speak that way. To say: "there is a reading", or "there is an attempt to save a child". But the second formula does not seem to render what we mean by "selflessness": there is no sacrifice involved there. It says something quite different, namely: in the concrete phenomenon "the saving of a child" there is a saving agent. We might ask where that saving agent was before the event happened. The answer is: before this happened, there was only a possible saver, and in the event he became concrete. Thus to save a child and to die while trying to do so is to render concrete a virtuality which was only dormant. This shows that "selflessness" is not to sacrifice something (a self), but an attitude which permits some virtualities to become concrete. And this may be extended: each time some of the virtualities dormant within "us" (meaning: some human virtualities) become concrete, this is due to the attitude we call "selfless". Even in cases which are less dramatic than the saving of a child is. And vice versa: "selfishness" is the attitude which prevents human virtualities to become concrete.

An entire new anthropology emerges from such considerations. "Man" is an aspect of specific concrete relations, and he is only virtual outside those relations. Traditional anthropologies talk nonsense, because they substantialize the virtualities by terms like "self", or "mind", or "spirit", or "soul", or whatever. When they say "man", they do not mean the concrete phenomenon, but some virtualities which may or may not become concrete. Of course: one may talk about the fields of virtualities which surround concrete phenomena, and from which those phenomena crystalize, but one must say so if one does so.

Now to admit that I am concretely there only while reading, or saving a child (or being part of some such concrete relation), and that outside any concrete relation I am only an abstraction from those relations (strictly speaking: nothing), constitutes a radical change from tradition. For instance: the political quarrel between "left" and "right": "is man good for society or is society good

for man?" becomes utter nonsense. Because it may be shown that "man" and "society" are extrapolations (abstractions) from concrete inter-human relations. Concretely there is no man outside society, and no society without men. Thus the newly emerging anthropology, if and when it is espoused, will require a whole set of new epistemological, ethical, political and indeed esthetic categories, a whole new set of values.

This "revolution" (which is a term in fashion) may be stated this way: I cannot identify with "myself" (or with anything "within myself"), but only in relation to some other. Whatever I am, I am with reference to others. Identity implies difference. To put this more existentially: "I" is what others call "you", and vice versa. Whatever I may do or suffer (be it ethical or political action, scientific research, technical application or creative esthetic endeavor) is how I relate to others. Everything human is intersubjective. There is no "individuum" (we know from the natural sciences that there is nothing which cannot be divided). There is no such thing as an author who created in splendid isolation. There is no "man" in this sense. You may call this "selflessness", if you feel like it. But then you will have to admit that there is nothing noble about it. We are simply like that, and if we are "selfish" we become abstractions from everything that is concrete, we quite simply "are not".

12/7

Bien à vous