

# FIRST AND SECOND SELF

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IN Burckhardt's epoch-making book there is a remark to the effect that prior to the Renaissance "man's awareness both of himself and nature lay dreaming or half-awake beneath a veil. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation . . . With the Renaissance man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such."

A single sentence from the *Phaedo*, or from the New Testament might be considered sufficient to ruin and dislodge this startling generalization. When his friends ask the dying Socrates if he has any commands for them, he replies: "What I always say, nothing new; by taking care of yourselves you will oblige me and mine, whatever you do; but if you should neglect yourselves, even though you were to promise me much now, and earnestly, you will do no more good at all." Or, more succinctly still, there is the publican in the Christian parable: "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

The Greeks were evidently capable of taking seriously the admonition of the Delphic oracle, "Know thyself." And Christians thought of themselves as persons for whose saving, God had been content to die on the cross—that is in a fashion basically hostile to the sway of a collective consciousness of race, tribe, party and the rest. Yet for all that, it may be that Burckhardt's view points toward a truth; for it does not follow that the self-awareness of the "spiritual individual", experienced by Greek or Christian is identical with that of the Renaissance man. To put it bluntly, the self they were aware of may not have been the same self. It is tempting to suggest that they differed in fact as widely as "I" from "me".

The subject-self, indicated by the word "I", is like the organ of vision, which has to be invisible to itself just because it does the seeing; where as the "me", the object-self, is like the reflection of the eye seen on a mirror surface. No doubt if words like "object," "objective", properly apply to this reflection, it is because it is the eye (or the self) in reflection, a reliable image, for certain purposes, of the thing reflected. The colour of your eyes, which you cannot see, is actually that perceived in their reflected image, for example. It is only where the reflected image (or the "me") is supposed to be the full equivalent of the organ of vision (or the "I") that this objective attitude reveals its limitations by precipitating us into error: when, for

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instance, the eye seen on the mirror surface is mistaken for a living eye, returning our glance; for the eye in the mirror is, in fact inactive and unseeing, a blind eye.

Let us term these two, "I" and "me," the first and second self, following the lead of George MacDonald when he remarked: "People often ask advice in hope of finding the adviser side with . . . (the) second or familiar self instead of with this awful first self, of which they know so little". It will be maintained here that the specific "discovery" of the Renaissance, bequeathed by it to modern psychology, is that of the second or object self, rather than the discovery of the "spiritual individual as such". The legacy is one that only the so-called "depth-psychology" of our day has shown any reluctance to accept.

If we examine more closely the two illustrations previously brought under tribute, the force of these observations will be increased. No doubt one of Socrates' (or Plato's) chief discoveries was that of the "spiritual individual," the responsible self whose free decision, and not blind fate, determines its destiny here and hereafter: the imperishable pages of the myth of Er the Armenian, at the end of the *Republic* demonstrate the fact. Yes, Socrates, the very prototype of the free, conscious and responsible self, turns out to possess a demon—or, to translate to *daimonion* more adequately, some holy thing—within him, to which he turns in emergencies for consultation that bears all the appearances of being oracular. Superficially, then, he seems just like the tribal primitive, who is so embedded in the common life, awareness and talk of his fellows that he is impelled to regard any intimations of individual selfhood with awe and mistrust and to treat this self as something alien to himself, which he must placate, and approach only with special precautions. To *daimonion*, however much it may look like this, must yet be something else, for Socrates is precisely the one who has made the most decisive break with the reassuring warmth of the collective of tribal consciousness, assuming the arduous task of constant individual wakefulness and alertness, in the conviction that the unexamined, i.e. unconscious, life is not worth living. Awe there is, toward something that transcends the self, and upon which the self is most intimately dependent; it is, however, a much profounder and more clairvoyant awe than that of the primitive; say, of Lawrence's Arab tribesman in respect of the self-containment of the British troops attached to them toward the end of the war; of whom they wonderingly remarked that each seemed to be a tribe all to himself. It is an awe not prior,



but subsequent to the discovery of the object-self, and perfectly appropriate to the sources of "the awful first self, of which we know so little."

Again, the medieval mystic (who, surely, of all men ought not to be charged with ignoring the "spiritual individual") shows very little concern with the familiar "me", or second self, though he is quite aware of its existence. The fourteenth century author of the *Book of Privy Counselling*, to take a typical example, requires his reader to discipline himself in turning away from the second toward the first self, in order to be open to the promptings of the divine Source of all being: "I hold him brutish and untaught that cannot think and feel that he himself is; not what he himself is, but that he himself is. I am, and I see and feel that I am: and not only that I am but that I am so and so and so and so . . . thus mayest thou see that the beginning and end of thy attention is most substantially set in the naked sight and the blind feeling of thine own being." Beneath the emphasis ("I hold him brutish and untaught, etc.") no attempt is made to overcome the difficulty of catching a glimpse of that which catches glimpses; in common with the mystical tradition of the West, he simply affirms that it can be done and that the means to it is negative, a deliberate and systematic turning of attention away from the self that is "so and so and so and so," i.e. from the object-self. In this direction we immediately encounter *daimonion*, a holy thing other than the self than in its Christian form: "He is thy being, and in him thou art what thou art . . . evermore saving this difference between him and thee, that he is thy being and thou not his." This is the lesson of our Lord when he saith "Whoso will love me, let him forsake himself; as who saith: 'Let him strip himself of himself, if he will be verily clothed in me, that am the flowing garment of love and of lasting that never shall have end.'" It is as if the central assertion of the Gospel were to be read, "He who seeks to save his second self shall lose his first; but he who loses the second for my sake, shall save the first."

Follow the diametrical reverse of this counsel, and you obtain something like the Renaissance form of self-consciousness, as represented by the major figures of Montaigne and Descartes. Montaigne sets out in the *Essais* most deliberately to depict "not man, but an individual," himself: and himself in process; the fluctuation of his feelings, circumstances, convictions in their passage. "I do not paint being," he says; "I paint passage; not that from one age to another—as the people say from seven

years to seven years—but from day to day, minute to minute. If my mind could take foot and take form, I should not essay myself, I should resolve myself. It is always in apprenticeship and in trial." "I wish to represent the progress of my humours, and that each should be seen in its growth. I wish I had begun sooner, and would take pleasure in recognizing the succession of my changes."

The resulting portrait is that familiar "delightfully modern" piece of naturalism in full detail, which marks an epoch. Montaigne is the first human being to record of himself all such facts as that he likes a blanket to cover his feet, that he prefers to sit with his feet higher than his head, that he eats so gluttonously that he frequently bites his tongue, and even his fingers; the first to dwell lovingly and fully on what ancient and medieval alike would have rejected as trivial, unessential, transitory—namely, every twist and turn of the second self in its shimmering course through the ocean of events.

It is true that somewhat to his astonishment Montaigne discovers that no description is as difficult as that of oneself: that "I evades myself always, and hides myself from myself:" in fact, in at least one passage, we may detect a definite haunted recognition of the first self when he writes that he has constantly in mind and soul a certain dim image of himself "which presents me, as in a dream, with a better form than that I have employed; but I am unable to seize and exploit it." The alchemical (or chemical) alternative between "resolution" and "assay" (the term to which Montaigne gave a permanent new meaning by attaching it to his book) is a real alternative. Such a search for the first self as is engaged in by the author of the *Book of Privy Counselling* requires final decision, commitment, engagement—it is interested in obtaining a precipitate, a resolution; and after a certain point sternly prohibits any further assaying or sampling, or tampering with the ingredients. It is because Montaigne cannot resist the fascination of watching change and helping it along that the phantom image of a first self and of a possible resolution evades his grasp. Certainly few books have ever been given a more significant and revealing title than his.

With Descartes the question is transferred from a literary to a momentous metaphysical context. The whole future is at stake: nothing less than the entire demolition of the planless slums and tortuous, haphazardly traced streets of the city of knowledge, to be followed by a rebuilding on the rational geome-

trical town-plan of a single architect of genius, Descartes himself. He sets out to reject and rid himself of "everything which has hitherto passed for knowledge": to doubt till doubt gives out, breaks down, cancels itself, and is replaced by absolute certainty.

This eventuates precisely in regard to his own existence as a conscious being. "Je pense, donc je suis": such is the initial pronouncement of the Cartesian reconstruction, which, while everything else is still in doubt, cannot possibly be doubted. Jung makes the penetrating observation that the self that formulates this proposition—"I think, or am conscious, therefore I exist"—cannot be the self to which the proposition refers; there is an implied and suppressed certainty prior to that with which we are presented. Let us then try to complete the statement: "I am, therefore I think, therefore I am;" if that is not a circular statement, it is because it is the first self, the subject or agent self, that is intended by the prefixed phrase; while the second "I am" refers to its familiar observable and observed reflection, the Cartesian "thinking thing" or object-self.

"Je pense, donc je suis," under the inoffensive mask of a truism, is quite as momentous a statement as Descartes claims; its influence persists through each step of his metaphysics, colouring each traditional theme—the existence of God, the theory of substance, the nature of matter, even the assertion of the freedom of will and the activity of intellect and imagination, with novel and peculiarly subdued hues. *The Meditations* shows Descartes at work noiselessly transforming the correlative concepts of man and nature, to accord with this conviction that the ego or me, the object self, is the only self there is any sense in talking about; he is the first begetter of "psychology without the psyche," and of its physical correlate, nature as a system of thoroughgoing mechanistic determinism, and thereby the first begetter of the modern age.

Let us try to put the point once more in different terms. Others in plenty had sought knowledge in an act of introversion. "Do not go abroad," they had warned; or "Enter into thyself, there thou wilt find what thou seekest in vain without." But until Descartes none had limited the inner field to the "clear and distinct" ideas of "Universal Mathematics," i.e. a generalized science of "order and measurement" as such; through this act of mathematical introversion, what Descartes finds within himself is precisely the outside, the objective *order*, to which the infinite particularities of the physical universe can be subdued and thus known. "Second self" and "world machine," I repeat,



are not accidentally connected in this doctrine; they mutually imply and condition each other.

## II

Incomplete as these historical references are they call for some measure of elucidation of the problem itself. Why and how is the "productive will," the source of energy of our being so largely hidden from itself?

Here, since we cease to court the severe muse of history, we may employ a lighter, more familiar tone, and begin with a myth, the profound Greek myth of origins. According to this the brother Titans Prometheus and Epimetheus (forethought and afterthought) were charged with the making and equipment of man. Their gifts were good, so were their intentions, but yet the thing went wrong. This was mainly the fault of Epimetheus, who had not foresight enough to see that he was giving the gifts away too liberally to the beasts, before he reached man; no great swiftness or strength, no claws, no shell or wings were left by this time. But he did make and give him (as an afterthought) a woman, the first. She was Pandora (All-gifts), a splendid creature with one flaw, the charming feminine weakness of curiosity; unable to resist opening the chest in which Epimetheus kept all unused ills, she let them loose; and there she stands, poor sweet Pandora, unable to catch them again, and weeping at what she has done; superfluous evils have plagued man ever since.

The bargain was that Epimetheus would make man, and Prometheus check him over afterward; whatever led them to exchange their functions that day, it must be at the root of the trouble, for a being planned by afterthought and revised by forethought is in a queer case. Anyway, Prometheus, seeing what a botch had been made, assaulted heaven, stole the sun's fire by lighting his torch at it, and so gave man the technological instrument by which he gained, and has since held and increased his power. Sensitively enough, the Greeks had misgivings about this stolen gift; Prometheus, for the impiety, was chained to a rock, with eagles ceaselessly tearing at his liver—the organ whose dark, slippery, reflecting surface makes it the birthplace of dream-images and omens of the future. We, for whom it has been reserved to see the globe, on at least five occasions now, briefly and menacingly touched with the sun's torch will not make the mistake of taking Prometheus just for what the

anthropologists call a culture-hero; he is himself an omen, and a symbol of a kind of bad conscience, of the sense of danger in knowledge.

Epimetheus' gift, which was to passion, was a good one; and so was Prometheus' gift to intelligence: yet awkwardly enough each adds to the tale of troubles and sorrows.

Since the parable draws our attention to time before and after, let us take a simplified look at that mysterious matter. Time is basically just flow or passage, and for the brutes seems to form a kind of point-land, such as a one-dimensional line would be; a point could have no means of looking forward or backward, its vision would be blocked by the ends of the line, i.e. the points on either side of it. With man, singularly privileged in respect of the power of reflection, time becomes more like a plane of flatland; he too is of course subject to the linear process of succession, but can, as it were, run out crosswise to it along another line and obtain a perspective on it: he takes certain bearings on passage in both directions, thus estimating the flow along which he is carried; memory (or hindsight), and intelligence (or foresight) free him from the immediacy of the animal present and give him what might be called a second temporal dimension over and above succession—that of duration: not just passing, but lasting through passage.

He is freed from immediacy by reflection, yes, but in consequent peril of losing any sense of the present by becoming absorbed in the backward or the forward look. Here we begin to see the full force of the myth of Epimetheus and Prometheus. Perhaps, man reflects, there is a third dimension to the queer thing, which, since he is a flat creature confined in flatland, he can never hope to perceive; "above" and "below" are strictly inconceivable to dwellers in flatland who, as someone has remarked, would just be enormously puzzled by the succession of round rings imprinted on their plane by any elephant happening to stumble across it. But, his suspicions aroused, man, we said, torments himself with the idea that there may be more; with great rigour, in the scientific theory of relativity (which is not our concern) he deepens the notion of simultaneity to cover events separated by millions of light-years—any event that takes place between the emission and return of a signal between two remote bodies being simultaneous with any other, in that frame of reference—and in philosophy and theology (which are our concern), he arrives at the notion of *eternity*, or of a restored present, for which the whole past and the whole future would be

contemporaneous, thereby overcoming the antithesis of "backward" and "forward."

But, and this is the point of the myth, since he is in fact limited to succession and ducation, to flatland, these intimations of eternity may simply lead man more powerfully backward or forward; intellectually, the eternal seems to be within his grasp when he rises, in science, above the passing and particular to the knowledge of timeless laws; in terms of passion, his awareness of absence—that singular and disturbing privilege!—may turn into an effort to suppress time, and eternalize the past. In the first case he will be active, objective, extraverted, living ahead of himself—forward-going it is called—in a word, a scientist; in the second, passive, subjective, introverted, turned backward to the past, an artist.

We are talking of extremes here; no doubt a sound distinction of science and art would have to add much to modify this contrast; yet extremes do exist, and must be reckoned with; the moral of the Greek myth still holds: though both art and science, both hindsight and foresight are in principle good things, in fact, as a result perhaps of some division or inadequacy of will, each has been and is a fertile source of woe. Extremes too have the value of being exemplary or instructive. We cannot see that to be turned exclusively inward and backward in retrospection and introversion is a bad thing; it is to live in the moist darkness of unintelligent passion, like the bereaved and demented mother who daily expects the return of her dead child. Everyone should by the same token be capable of seeing, though in a "scientific" civilization like ours there is a prejudice against seeing it, that to be turned exclusively outward and forward, in extraversion and prospection is a bad thing too. It is to live in the "dry light" of dispassionate intellect; pathologically speaking, if the first involves loss of contact with the objective world, the second means loss of the sense of selfhood, and of other selves; each is an alienation, whether from outer or inner reality. It would be difficult to say which bears the more serious potentialities.

No doubt there is a project, repeatedly favoured, to guard against these extremes by tempering Prometheus and Epimetheus with each other. The discipline of science will go far to correct a passionate nature, training in poetry and art to correct an inhuman intellectualism; yet like all compromise solutions this remains on the surface; if man's strange aspiration is not satisfied either in the "eternity," actually the unchanging character, of the laws of nature or in the false "eternity," sought



by the artist who sets out like Proust, in search of Time Past, we should not expect any combination of the two movements to succeed.

Let us return to the diagnosis and to what may have been omitted from it. By reference to our temporal "flatland," we specified two preoccupations (with knowing and feeling) leading respectively ahead and backward and also one conjecture, or suspicion that might be conveyed by saying that one side of the plane is lit and the other in darkness, for this is not to endow the flat creatures with a perspective out from their plane, but to present them with a puzzling difference on it; and the puzzle is reflected in an aspiration, which we have called the aspiration toward eternity. Next, we have said this aspiration can become misplaced, either immobilizing man in passionate brooding upon the past, or catapulting him ahead through his grasp of laws and of their technological applications, in frenzied motion and activity, till he lives in constant preoccupation with times that are not yet. In either case it is as if his present had dropped right out of the plane, or, if you prefer, as if all meaning had dropped out of the present. It is as Pascal says: he wanders about shamelessly in times that are not his at all, ignoring the only one that does belong to him. Thus robbed of his present, he is grieved at the brevity of life or appalled by its tedium, i.e. its endless length, or even, what confirms the fact of a total dislocation of the present, makes both complaints concurrently.

Looking more closely, we may detect four things that make a present unbearable: impatience, anxiety, nostalgia, and remorse. Impatience and anxiety are for the future, one desiring and one fearing it (though by that very fear inducing precipitancy, the habit of jumping ahead of the *now*). Nostalgia and remorse play comparable roles for the past, one desiring it to be, the other not to be. By these four threads the lost present, subsisting no doubt somewhere in the darkness below the plane in our analogy, is connected with the past and present; along them the energies of man are distributed backward or forward or in both directions at once. His desire and will, that is to say, must be reckoned in, to complete the account so far given in terms of feeling and knowing.

The decisive term here is *will*,<sup>1</sup> in it the various obscurities we

1. The traditional threefold distinction of intellect, feeling and will (cognition, emotion, conation) is impenitently employed in place of more sophisticated, and evasive, substitutes. I recently read a letter from an eminent psychologist in which he advised that these "overworked" terms be abandoned in favour of "intention-attitude—and direction—phenomenology."

Can it be that their horror of "faculty psychology" blinds people to the fact that faculties, or functions, were never taken to be mutually exclusive and non-communicating? Can it be again that eagerness to regard these as aspects of the total personality, the man as a whole blinds them to the dis-integrity and lack of wholeness that marks our actual nature?

have detected meet: the will is the "awful first self," the "dark under the time-plane" too, perhaps; certainly the cause of that loss of presence that sends the Epimethean Montaigne backward (in essay, not resolution) to perpetuate his past; and the Promethean Descartes impatiently forward to live in a scientific New Jerusalem of his own planning. The will is, also, I expect, what psychoanalysts mean by the Unconscious—a term so negative as to be equivalent roughly to "the Question Mark" though in practice they endow this source of energy with representative and emotional ingredients inseparable from the will.

With it, too, we are expressly introduced into the context of religious life and reflection, which are of concern with man's dividedness and its cure. Primitive myths dimly, the higher religions explicitly (though not with equal adequacy), trace the dividedness to the will and present surrender to the divine will as the only means whereby man may be made whole—restored, that is, to his present without robbing him of either intelligence or passion. In the Christian scheme, for instance, the *libido sentiendi* (which produces a Montaigne) and the *libido sciendi* (which gave us Descartes) are alternative products of a more radical defect, a corruption of will itself: the *libido dominandi* or will to power, or tyrannical self-will. Here emerges the "familiar second self" of the Renaissance, the cherished mirror-image, for which presence and, with it, true energy (or activity) have lost their meaning; the residual unity of the resultant is no longer sufficient to permit us to say what it would be marvelous to be able to say, that it is the "whole man" who thinks and feels and wills. And if he cannot honestly say that he wills anything with his whole being, does that not simply show how far he is from having a whole being? Gradually, an art comes to be pursued for art's sake, not for life, science for science's sake not for life, even morality for morality's sake and not for life, the effects of the will to power grow more evident on an increasing scale.

If self-will is the disease, religion, we said, offers in some form the remedy of surrender. Morality it regards as no real remedy; for we are born having everything our own way, and regarding ourselves as the centre around which everything revolves, and this point of view, which we must get rid of, we cannot get rid of; moral effort is a will to dominate the will to domination, and leaves man essentially where he was—in the dark beneath the plane. The purest of moralists (the Kantian, for instance, who always acts according to the law of duty) is one

whom everything invites to form a very favorable opinion of himself and there is no moral way out of this predicament. Surrender, in the religious sense of conversion, repentance, dedication of will may then seem impossibly difficult, even a sort of contradiction, if will is supposed to assert its own denial.

On the other hand, it might seem that nothing is more common or more absurdly easy, nothing more dangerous either, when to *daimonion* to which surrender is made happens to be some revival of primitive myth—as when the German people, suddenly discovering that they had a present, rushed to surrender their wills to Hitler. The temples of Venus, of Mercury the god of commerce, and of Mars the god of violence are crowded with devotees. Then there is that darkest religion of all, the one of which MacDonald says that the more devout a man is in it the fewer disciples he makes, namely, self-worship. But this is to swing back to where we began, with self-will and the conviction, so hard to overcome, that one is somehow terribly special. The fact, as these forms of "surrender" are more or less tainted with the will to domineer; the whole realm of myth lies in the dark, beneath the plane; religion begins only on the other side of it, in the light.

How much, finally, can be said about the first self and the dimension of eternity in terms of this illuminated side of the plane? Little, I imagine that is more than a variant of what writings like the *Book of Privy Counselling* assert, unless we raise the question of the right by which those who profess to have had no experience in religion challenge the validity of such direct reports—and it is too late to deal with that now.

It seems, then, that the will to domination is tied up with a hypnotized vision of the second or mirror-self; as long as this occupies the focus of vision, every effort to let go simply reinforces the clutch of that will, just as in insomnia every effort to relax merely adds to the tension. The difficulty is that self-will cannot be yielded; the ease is that it is sufficient to ask for help, in a sustained way, and the giving-over takes place. It might not be an inaccurate summary of the evicence of those with most experience of what it is, to say "Thy will be done", to suggest that a powerful attractive force from above the plane draws the present vertically up into it, from the darkness in which it lies absent; reintegrating therewith into the plane those threads of remorse, which becomes joy at the effacement of guilt; nostalgia, for the past, which becomes gratitude for it; anxiety for the



future, which becomes peace; and impatience, which is turned to hope or confidence.

This is what a "restored" present would be: not a return to the narrow immediacy of the animal moment, but an enlargement of the *now* to overcome "the isolation consequent upon the "backward" or "forward" movement. If it brings awareness that it is *always* now, that there is no other time than now, no doubt this "always" is not quite eternity; only the sun that illumines the entire plane, if there is one, can take that view of the whole of succession and duration at once; but it is different enough from the rest of man's experience of time, enough like a participation in eternity remarkable enough in its effects, to strengthen the flat creature's conjecture of a third dimension to time. Or, if you prefer, the fact that, collectively speaking, the plane of life is, dotted with peculiar rings—the lives of those who do know that it is always now, and who live in the present—constitutes one of the main reasons for thinking that there is an elephant.

Only in such a present is will an unbampered source of knowledge and of feeling, passion suffused with intelligence and integrated with action, intellect both sensitive and practical; only such a *whole* man engaged in science, art or moral action would be engaged in all three at once, to harmonious effect.

It might be enough to say that to live in the present is to live in love, but as people understand that word so differently, it would be better to end with an unpretentious pun: the present is a present, a gift.