

Some Paradoxes of Reflective Thinking

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Shall I not reckon among the perfections of the human understanding that it can reflect upon itself? Consider its habits as dispositions arising from past actions? judge which way the mind inclines? And direct itself to the pursuit of what seems fittest to be done? Our mind is conscious to itself of all its own actions, and both can and often does observe what counsels produced them; it naturally sits a judge upon its own actions, and thence procures to itself either tranquility and joy, or anxiety and sorrow. In this power of the mind, and the actions thence arising consists the whole force of conscience, by which it proposes laws to itself, examines its past and regulates its future conduct.

Richard Cumberland¹

The halls of my area's elementary schools are plastered with various posters and signs directing the children to «STOP AND THINK.» If one should stop and think about what exactly these signs are intended to accomplish, it's safe to say that «think» is being used in a special sense here, since not any old thinking will suffice; we are urging the children to take the time necessary to engage in something like what Cumberland reckons to be among our «perfections.» After all, the child at hand will have already thought about what they are doing sufficiently to be doing it (or else we couldn't direct them to stop), and so directing them to simply think more about it may not be useful advice-why should they? Apparently (and it is apparent) we are trying to get the kids to think in a certain, reflective, way. I am going to scrutinize this «way» somewhat. My thesis is that in an important sense it, or what I will call «the reflective self,» has its origins within a community of inquiry.

Any community of inquiry requires that its participants exercise their reflective capacities. Without a reflective group of students, a genuine dialogue is impossible. This is why facilitators of such groups are trained to recognize such reflective thinking in themselves and others, and to then implement strategies that encourage its use. But what do we know about reflection? What is its nature and where does it get its value and authority? As educators our focus has been on a pragmatic understanding of reflection, whereby we learn to spot the behavioral signs of reflection and reflective inquiry. This is understandable given our aims and methods. But in our role as *philoso-*

phers of education or philosophically responsible educators, we ought not let any elements of our models proceed unexamined, for doing so can mask internal tensions and difficulties within those theories which can burden the task of those charged with realizing those models in a classroom.

Of course, Philosophy for Children is not the only «program» within the history of philosophy which makes guiding assumptions concerning the value of reflection. Many of the most famous epistemic projects within the history of philosophy, from Plato's elenctic method to Descartes methodological skepticism, give it, or something like it, a crucial role. Many others within moral psychology - in fact any theory one which links morality to rationality - will have to make some commitments as to the nature and function of reflection. (Cumberland's link between (self-) consciousness and conscience has an etymological base in the fact that they share a Greek predecessor `syneidesis' [cuvet5rjot~] which originally meant, roughly, «to know in common with» and which came to mean for the medievals «to know in common with oneself.» (Korsgaard 1996, p. 93).) So we have Kant basing morality and duty on the reflective powers of rational humans, and John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, and other contemporary philosophers following his lead in this regard.²

With credentials reaching this deeply into our philosophical traditions, perhaps we ought not worry about the nature of reflection. Besides, isn't the question, «what is reflection?» one of those misguided «what is x?» queries of Socrates, which must assume complex things to have simple natures and words to have single unalterable meanings? Isn't it just obvious that people can and do reflect on themselves and what they could be, on their actions real and imagined, and on their beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, and interests, and isn't that the only fact that Philosophy for Children needs presume. The real nature of reflection is not a question which we need concern ourselves with.

I am in fact partly persuaded by this initial reaction. Because the concept of reflection, like most of our psychological concepts, is metaphorical from top to bottom, any analytical investigation of it is bound to be limited and partial. One can only push our mental idiom so far, for beyond that point, our ideas and models start revealing more about the investigator than the investigator's mind. We will see, in due course, that the metaphors wrapped up in our understanding of reflection will give rise to complications. However, having said this much, let me rejoin the prior course of inquiry by re-focusing it. Our real interest lies, then, not in some abstract model of reflection - let us perhaps leave this important issue to the cognitive psychologists - or even in an analysis of the nature of reflection in general, but is rather in understanding the source of its normative authority. Why, that is, do we place such cachet on reflective thinking, scrutiny and equilibrium? We apparently invest reflection with the power to improve upon the deliverances of our cognitive processes. Our question now is, simply, why? What gives us any assurance that little Billy's utterances will be more useful to the group if little Billy has reflected on what he is about to utter? After all, surely if little Billy's thinking skills and attitudes and such weren't valuable before, why do we think they will be improved for having been the object of Billy's attention or self-scrutiny?

The authority of reflection seems thus paradoxical and making this paradox explicit will demonstrate some of reflection's appeal. What follows we may call

The Paradox of Authoritative Reflection:

- (1) If thinking is improved through reflection, then Little Billy's thinking is improved by Little Billy reflecting on it.
- (2) When Little Billy reflects on his thinking, he is thinking about thinking.
- (3) So Little Billy's thinking improves itself.
- (4) So either thinking is improved without reflection (see 3) or improvement through reflection is impossible (because it is circular (see 2)).

One fork of this dilemma collapses reflective thinking into just one mode of thinking, thus threatening its authority as a force external to reasoning itself; the other turns on the circularity implied by calling on, so to speak, an «in-house» auditor to balance the books.

Though we will soon dissolve this paradox, let me expand on it a little. The first fork undermines the necessity of reflection and is reminiscent of worries generated by Hobbes' use of a different type of authority. His sovereign, the Leviathan, has almost unlimited political power over its subjects, but Hobbes assures us that they need not fear: «For he that doth any thing by authority from another, doth therein no injury to him by whose authority he acts: but by this institution of a commonwealth, every particular man is author of all the sovereign doth» (*Leviathan*, Ch. XVIII, § 6). One wants to ask why the latter clause doesn't diminish the role of the sovereign. If, that is, each of us is the author of all the sovereign doth, then what sort of authority can it have over us? Doesn't the sovereign need some additional powers, some external to the aggregate of individuals and their perspectives?

The second fork, charging circularity, is mindful of Descartes' very suspicious argument in the *Meditations* for his «clear and distinct» criterion for certainty in his beliefs. Here is the reasoning:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. But do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain of anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem able to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (Third Meditation § 3 5)

Here one wants to ask how Descartes can be sure that his criteria is itself reliable?³ Because it is clearly and distinctly so by his lights surely won't do. If Descartes is authorized to determine the criteria by which his beliefs are sorted as true or justified, then one might as well have no criteria at all.

The Paradox of Authoritative Reflection forces us to conceive of reflection in a manner by which it is at once available for use by the cognizer, Little Billy, yet sufficiently independent of Little Billy to serve as a genuine or productive guarantor of what he non-reflectively might believe,

desire, favor, infer, or endorse. So in order for reflection to fill the role we ascribe it, it must have the ability to bring cognitive processes to bear on the task being attended to. These processes, often termed «higher-order» or «meta-cognitive,» are either kinds of cognitive processes distinct from those already employed in the «first-order,» cognitive task at hand, or these terms denote a specific manner in which these same cognitive tools can be used.⁴

Regardless of the mechanisms involved, our intuitive, pre-theoretical notion of reflection is of a set of capacities which stand apart from the self's immediate doxastic and practical situation and which can be brought to bear on elements of that situation in order to facilitate the decision making or action-guiding routines called for within it. The reflective self does more than reflect or mirror or represent the desires, impulses, concerns and commitments of the practical self, it can scrutinize these and can, according to its own criteria, selectively endorse a subset of them, rejecting the rest. It is this «judging» or «endorsing» function of reflection, that endows it with the seal of approval or power of imprimatur, upon which philosophers from Cumberland to Kant and beyond ground their moral theories in human psychology. The following quote from Nagel illustrates this. Here he is tracking the course of the development of an «objective will» from its origins in the «characteristically human capacity to move to a higher vantage point and a higher order of desires»:

An important method of objective integration is ordinary practical rationality, which is roughly analogous to the process of forming a coherent set of beliefs out of one's prereflective personal impressions. This involves not mere tolerance, but actual endorsement of some motives, suppression or revision of others, and adoption of still others, from a standpoint outside that within which primary impulses, appetites, and aversions arise. When these conflict we can step outside and choose among them. (Nagel 1986, p. 132)

It is insofar as the reflective self has this role in our everyday model of the mind that the «Paradox» of Authoritative Reflection above is dissolved. When Little Billy reflects, his thinking takes on a certain cast; it isn't just more of the same, but is of a different sort altogether. The aims of reflective thinking are radically altered from those of first-order, practical thinking. Reflection has as its aim the selection or endorsement of the most highly ranked option or choice available to it. Which options are thus available is completely context-dependent of course, but since reflection is always driven by a specific practical need within a determinate practical situation, this is only to be expected.⁵ Which criteria (understood as higher-order judgments, or judgments about first-order judgments) and ranking procedures are used will likewise be a function of the overall context or environment which the self is in. Once the aims of any thought process have changed, so will the methods and the values used to (respectively) pursue and assess this process.⁶ So whereas the practical self for the most part operates over perceptions and concerns itself with the speed and efficiency of its actions or judgments (where these are instrumental to some end), the reflective self has domain over many more aspects and commitments of the self, and must recognize and rank various often incompatible criteria of decision-making, be they moral, prudential, psychological, political, or what have you. The assumptions, heuristics, and generalizations available to the reflective self will be very different from those of the practical, engaged self. Again, whereas the practical self is always operating with an end or goal in place, the reflective self can generate alternative

means to satisfy a given goal, or to revise the goal in light of the available means (or even to generate alternative values by which these goals are chosen).

The key point is that the purview of the reflective self is broader than that of the practical self, so that whereas the latter has its scope limited to those options which will further its immediate and proximal goals, the reflective self has the requisite distance from these to use strategies which will improve their reliability and scope. In sum, and in Cumberland.'s terms, the way reflection «procures to itself tranquility or joy» is different, along a whole set of dimensions, from the way the acting and choosing self must do so.

This, then, is the received view of the source of the normative authority we attach to reflection. However, all of this can appear unsatisfactory, as being too facile to reveal the normative authority of reflection. The received view may be adequate as a description of what role we assign reflection and even as an account of the value we place on it, but worries can still surface as to the justification of this assignment and the credibility of this evaluation. It just seems too quick to conclude that the mind has this «perfection» and leave it at that. How can an individual learner's mind step outside of itself in order to take on the role of judge? How would it have any authority in this role, given that it is merely a product of the defendant's own mind? I think Nagel is too glib in asserting that in cases of conflict among desires, appetites, or what have you, «we can step outside and choose among them.» Where can we step to? What choice we reflectively make is still a choice we make, and as such surely it is characteristic of our personal, idiosyncratic preferences, so in what sense is it more objective than that? To speak of a «standpoint outside» of the practical self is to either (a) avoid the question of the source of normative reflections (since any standpoint is necessarily inside some set of concerns and commitments) or (b) to speak in metaphorical terms which have very problematic metaphysical consequences. Kant's noumenal self or Descartes' transcendental ego seem to be on order here.

So although the received view of reflection has a response to the initial paradox of authoritative reflection, that response isn't worry free. Perhaps the following, new and improved paradox can highlight what I see to be its undischarged assumptions regarding the value of reflection. Let us label it

The Paradox of Authoritative and Available Reflection:

(1) On the received view of normative reflection, a person's reflective self makes available grounds from which she can judge and selectively endorse some of her own beliefs, desires, attitudes, sentiments, commitments, and preferences (i.e., her practical self)

(2) For reflection to do this, it must allow for a more objective appraisal of the practical self, and so must have values, standards, and criteria of its own.

(3) Either the reflective self's values, standards, and criteria are idiosyncratic and personal or they are objective and impersonal.

(4) But (a) no set of idiosyncratic and personal criteria can provide an objective appraisal of practical self, and (b) no set of objective and impersonal values, standards, and criteria are available to any one person.

(5) So reflection, on the received view, is either not authoritative (see 4a) or unavailable (see 4b).

One could certainly question the dualism implicit in (3) or the unqualified absolutes of 4a and 4b, but I believe an argument of this sort does serve to pressure the received view (and ourselves) into going deeper. Historically, defenders of the received view of reflection have argued that the reflective self is, in some sense, a more universal self, and as such has access to more impersonal and objective standards of thought and action. Most famously, Kant insisted that the individual's respect for the (moral) law brought with it a claim to universality. That when I reflectively endorse the so called «maxim» (or subjective principle) on which my act is based, I thereby implicitly recommend that maxim for anyone similarly situated. Nagel emphasizes this element of the received view, as in the following passage:

The reflective self is in its nature more universal than the original, unreflective self, because it achieves its self-conscious awareness by detaching from the individual perspective. The reason we can no longer decide from the purely local perspective within which the original appearances or impulses are found, is that once we observe ourselves from outside ... our choice becomes not just what to believe or do, but what this person should believe or do. And that has to be a decision about what any person so situated should believe or do. (Nagel 1996, p. 203)

I think this element of universality suitable strengthens the received view and allows it to nullify The Paradox of Authoritative and Available Reflection.

However, though we are almost done in our examination of reflection, the view we have reached can be strengthened further.⁷ The question remaining is how these more universal or universalizable standards become available to the individual albeit reflective thinker. Nagel's claim that the reflective self is «in its nature» more universal presupposes but doesn't provide for an answer to this question. The leap from reflection to universality can be ameliorated if we recall that thinking is a process of internalizing (and hence endorsing) the standards and methods of one's community of thinkers - a point that Ann Margaret Sharp has emphasized.⁸ As those familiar with Philosophy for Children no doubt know, Vygotskian psychologies view cognitive development as advancing through stages wherein external social functions are internalized by a child and synthesized there. In his own famous words: «Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears between people as an inter-psychological category, and then within the child as an intra-psychological category.»⁹

I am not claiming that the reflective self *is* nothing other than the internalized community of inquiry, though this *is* one (strong) way of enlisting Vygotsky in this regard. However, as we have seen, reflection requires that you separate a part of yourself from yourself and then see what the «community

standards» demanded or expected or permitted of you. The only non-circular, independent, genuinely authoritative source which *is* available for the child to learn of these expectations, demands, and allowances is the scrutiny others have given her in the past. I mean the closest thing to deliberative reflection *is* deliberative conversation with another like-minded conspecific. To assume otherwise, a la nativism for instance, is to summarily close off the larger social and political dimensions of a communities of inquiry. The latter compel *us* to create a context which best fosters the reflective capacities of children.

So we see that telling children simply to stop and think is not enough. We must provide a model by which they can enter the game of giving and asking for reasons and a learning context which values their doing so.

NOTES:

1. R. Cumberland, R. *Treatise of the Laws of Nature*, 1672, quoted in Korsgaard 1996, p. 90.

2. Here is some respective documentation for this claim. For Kant, who defined duty as «the necessity of an action done out of respect for the law» (*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, First Section, (§ 400), the moral «law» here is a product of the will (as found only in a free and rational person) and this, Korsgaard argues (1996, Ch. 3) is roughly synonymous with the reflective self. Rawls' theory of justice is founded on the ability and willingness) of fairminded and reasonable persons to form a «political conception of justice» via a process of due reflection» (see his *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 48-51). Nagel (1986) relies on reflection to bridge the subjective and objective points of view which, if left alone, threaten nihilism, solipsism, and skepticism (see below).

3. For more on the circularity of Descartes «epistemic internalism» see Ernest Sosa's «Reflective Knowledge In the Best Circles». *Journal of Philosophy*, XCIV, (1997) pp. 410-430.

4. That is, reflection or the reflective self could either have an architectural organization that enabled a broader set of databases to be brought online in order to achieve the desired outcome, or it could simply enable the cognitive centers already being used to do their jobs in a more effective way - a way, say, that used heuristic devices to generate and evaluate possible outcomes or scenarios. (This is fast becoming a question for the cognitive psychologists.)

5. I owe Maria Morales of Florida State University for emphasizing the fact that for Socrates and Plato reflection and critical thinking were thus driven by practical affairs and couldn't be profitably discussed or trained divorced of such contexts. Lipman echoes this when he says that all (reflective) inquiry aims at sound judgments.

6. This interrelationship between facts, methods, and values reflects on the level of the individual thinker a structural feature of scientific theories. See Larry Laudan's «reticulationist» model of scientific justification in his *Science and Values*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

7. What follows is further elaborated in my «Meno Stottlemeier: Linking Socratic Methods with Socratic Contents» forthcoming in *Thinking*.

8. In lectures delivered at La Segunda Conferencia/Taller Internacional de Filosofia Para Ninos held in San Cristobal de Las Casas during January, 1997.

9. L.S. Vygotsky, «The Genesis of Higher Mental Functions» in J.V. Wertsch (ed.) *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, pp. 144-88. (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1981) p. 163.

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