
Reflection, Internalising the prison?

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Abstract

This paper is an expanded version of a seminar presented at the Auckland College of Education in May 1999. My intention is to explore the complex concept 'reflection' from its 'darker' side. Recognising an internal dialectic in the concept in no way negates its absolute importance in the development of a critical self-consciousness. My interest here is not with reflection as critical contemplation, which is the process of review and evaluation aimed at uniting theory and practice in the service of personal liberation and social emancipation, rather, I wish to explore the other side of the dialectic. The exploratory question is: 'given the power of reflection as the internalised mirror of self-consciousness, can this humanising activity become the mechanism for the internalising and surveillance of previously externalised power relations of oppressive authority?'

To combine Marx, Freud, Foucault and Weber in a rather unusual alliance, I visualise 'the iron cage of rationality' being self-imposed as the super-ego becomes all-powerful through the surveillance of reflection. We build the iron cage from the inside. Reflection has the potential to become a sophisticated method of internalising external power relations. The exercise of power through methods of control over individuals has changed in modernity. As punishment was to the eighteenth century and before, as morality was to the nineteenth century, so then is anxiety to the twentieth century and beyond.

How is this self-controlling anxiety structured into the self's subjectivity? The subject is created out of the ways in which the self's image interacts with the self's desires. Methods by which the image of one's self become methods incorporated into the construction of the self's subjectivity provide the conduit for anxiety to move from the external image or identity, to the internalised self or subject. Such anxiety serves as internalised surveillance, as a self-imprisoning super-ego which limits both the creativity of subjectification and the expression of that creativity in external activity.

It is by this means of moving the 'outside in' that the process becomes the product. The new born becomes a self through the process of self-imaging within the relationship with the mother (or mother substitute). In the interaction between mother and new born, the child begins to sense its separateness, and then to experience this separateness within the interaction of its separated self with the other. The concept of

its own subjectivity becomes established. The self, that is the child, becomes a subject within the interaction with an object - the mother, and in turn, is its mother's object. The subject is established within this process of intersubjectivity from the mother's image of the child, an image reflected back to become the fledgling subjectivity of the new born.

This process of creating the subject through the infant's awakening self-consciousness is the earliest use of reflection. Although it is an uncritical reflection it demonstrates the fundamental role of reflection in the creation of subjectivity. We become ourselves, our own subjects, through this process of responding to the image. In this case, the image is our own image. It is a powerful and creative force - with an enormous potential. Reflection operates in the imaginative gap between the actual and the possible, between the experience and the thought of the experience, between the sense and the awareness of the sense, and between the self and the experience of the self - the experience that is the site for the creation of subjectivity. Reflection as the mechanism linking the self and its image is a crucial process of subjectivity.

The concept that we are our own subjects is a political concept. The subject is self-creating, but constrained within the limits of what is possible, between the actual and the possible. The relations that lie in the interactive space between self and other are power relations because the self strives for existence but within the identity permitted by the other, between the possibilities of desire and the actuality of what is permitted. The infant is given the identity of a girl or a boy, of a 'difficult' or an 'easy' baby, of a youngest sibling or a first born, of a member of a cultured group - all basic elements in the establishment of subjectivity. The self is recognised in these particular ways, so that he or she may be identified by others. The self now has an identity. In turn, this identity becomes incorporated into the subject's constitution through the imaging and reflecting processes of self-consciousness. Whoever controls the processes of, firstly, linking the self with its reflected image within intersubjectivity, and secondly, recognising the imaged self as an identity through interactive social relations, has the power to control the subject.

The interesting question is: firstly, under what circumstances is the reflective mechanism in the intersubjectivity process controlled by external forces of authority? And if under external forces, what are the practices that allow the mechanism to operate in this way? Secondly, under what circumstances is the reflection mechanism

dominated by the self's control? In other words, under what circumstances is reflection an emancipatory force in subject creation and change? The following discussion considers both possibilities.

In the first case the subject is under the control of an external authority. The self's identity is rigidly controlled and incorporated into the construction of subjectivity through the dominance of the authoritative 'other' over the self. The self is permitted a limited range of identities. It attempts to create itself as a subject that matches the permitted identities. A clear illustration of the difficulty of matching subjectivity to permitted identity is exemplified in cultures that have a limited; range of permitted gender types. Individuals will spend their childhood years attempting to 'be' the girl or the boy that is permitted in that particular culture. They will behave in the approved ways, think and relate socially to solicit the approval of the other and avoid punishment. An image of the self that matches the permitted cultural identity will be constitutive of the child's developing subjectivity. For some individuals, however, this becomes an impossible task. The identity permitted the subject and the subject desired by the self are in conflict. Often adolescence is a time when the individual confronts this fundamental mismatch. Either the external authority is rejected (often with unpleasant consequences for the young person), or the subjectised self tries, with varying degrees of success, to conform to the culturally prescribed identity.

How is the subject able to be dominated within that very constitutive process of subjectivity? In other words, how can we be 'made' by another? An understanding of power relations is essential to an understanding of subject creation. Power has no existence outside its exercise, apart from in reified form. It exists in its practice, in the form of control and dominance. How does the practice of power in the relationship between the infant/child and the mother (or mother-substitute), and later, in the relationship between the individual and other authority forms, affect the form of intersubjectivity?

There is a direct relation between the exercise of authority in the wider culture and the exercise of authority within the infant-mother and other significant familial relationships. This is the case because self-social relationships are cultured relationships. The types of behaviour, the ways in which emotions are expressed and received, the organisation of social interaction and the language used both to

internalise experience in thought and to externalise oneself in communication, have a common meaning that gives a particular culture its distinctive character.

In mainstream New Zealand culture (a culture comprising a range of ethnic groups), the establishment of mass education and the ensuring well-educated population make the brutal external forms of punishment practised in previous eras increasingly less unacceptable. By the end of the nineteenth century, swift and rough forms of social control were being replaced by the moral respectability of the Victorians, a morality which rested upon imposed normative standards. People agreed upon the moral codes even if they didn't actually practise those codes. They said they did and were convinced by their own words.

Significantly, the exercise of power by the 'father', that Victorian and post-Victorian standard of authority, whether in the form of an actual father or other patriarchal forms such as the state, was external. Its high-handed moral dimension was extremely controlling and made real by material controls even if those controls were less vivid than the public hangings and floggings common to earlier centuries. The Victorian form of control was still explicit, external and visible. Those with the authority to dominate the power relation and mould the subjectivity of others were clearly to be seen. And once seen, could then be resisted. It was a legitimised power relation that remained unstable and tense because its very visibility made it open to challenge and resistance (albeit with great difficulty).

It is not surprising that this was the age of mass democracy movements. Authority was made vulnerable by its own contradictory high moral position and its weak moral practice. People saw the possibility of making both themselves and their society in the image of their own making. Democratic movements, for workers' rights, for women's emancipation, for improved social justice, are all expressions of people believing that it is possible to make not only themselves but to achieve this 'in conditions of their own choosing'.

In the contemporary world however, despite the continued existence of these earlier widespread democratic movements in such movements as green ecological groups, gay liberation and cultural revivalism, new processes of dominance are replacing the visible, and hence challengeable, dominant authorities of the past. The emergence of more insidious processes that internalise the authority of the 'father' [or strengthen the

super-ego (to use Freud's term)], changes the tension and challenge inherent to unstable power relations in fundamental ways. Quite a lot becomes internalised. The self (that mass of imaginative potential to become), and the self's image (that response to the outside other through processes of intersubjectivity and reflection), operate in a state of unstable tension. This tension is the power relation between those forces of subject creation and the forces of identity prescription. Self-consciousness (or self-awareness or reflection) is the mechanism that links subjectivity creation and identity prescription. It manages the tension and enables the self to become a social subject, that is a subject with a recognised socio-cultural identity. As we reflect upon ourselves we impose the power of the image maker upon the unstable and creation ego or self. Reflection enables the image maker to still the ego, as it evaluates and judges.

Reflection is to be conscious or thoughtful about the actual self. But more than that, reflection is thinking about the possible self. The imagination links the actual self with the self of infinite possibilities as the subject reflects upon who and what s/he is, and who and what s/he may become. Reflection which links the actual and the possible allows the ego to take risks as it expresses itself (and its dynamic, the id) imaginatively upon the world. However, such imaginative self-creation may challenge the limits of prescribed identity. The tension between subjectivity creation and identity prescription becomes unbalanced as the external restricting and punishing authority is internalised in the form of anxiety. Reflection moves from being a mechanism of self-creation to an internal surveillance mechanism producing anxiety and the creative paralysis of an internalised authority control.

The actual and possible self are separated by reflection or self-consciousness. This is the space of creativity. However, when external authority becomes internalised anxiety, reflection becomes a mechanism of self-surveillance and self-limitation. The actual and possible self are one and the same and the subject becomes restrained and controlled. Creativity is replaced by restless and anxious activity; the frenetic consumer, the worker driven by overly high performance goals, or by unimaginative and 'safe' activity; the rigid manager, the compliant worker.

The 'rules of the judge' have become the self-imposed restraints on the judged. Reflection, as the tool for linking the self to the external (through imaging and subjectivity), is the outside taken inside in a way that differs from previous forms of socialisation. Now, the power of the outside is unchallenged because it is invisible.

Such internalised control, and its accompanying restriction of the creative urge, produces the overly rationalised self. The self lives life through the filters of its image, an image of restrained control and 'goodness'. These are the filters of the instrumental rationality imposed from outside and resting within the internalised self as a lump of permanent anxiety. Be ordered, be controlled, be reasonable, be rational, be careful - these restrictions of a social order become the structures of the self. Weber's 'iron cage' is within.

So what to do? Under what circumstances does reflection lead to creativity and emancipation and under what circumstances does reflection lead to anxiety and a self-judging paralysis? I have defined reflection as that consciousness which links the actual to the possible. Reflection that does not distinguish between these two states, that acts only to judge and control the actual self becomes a mechanism in the service of external authority. The self-empowerment that is required for self-creation is replaced by the internalisation of these external authorities. Reflection that serves to judge the actual in the light of the possible however is a very different form of self-consciousness. This is the nature of critical reflection. It links the actual and the possible, it judges the actual in the light of the possible and it enables the actual to be challenged and replaced. It is this, the critical component, not the judgmental one, that makes reflection emancipatory and creative.

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