

ABOUT SOME WESTERN BELIEFS IN INDIVIDUAL

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Introduction

The kind invitation for this Symposium I received in Paris mentioned that it was organized in order to promote mutual understanding among civilisations. It seems to me that one of the obstacles in the path of dialogue between Westerners and Asians is the sense Westerners have that their conception of individual is better than any other and that the progress leads necessarily to this conception. For this reason, in this talk, I will try to point out certain aspects of our conception of individual which, far from being valuable for anybody on this planet, are just, I think, delusory beliefs.

Most of the time, the western modern conception of individual presents itself as a whole, as if its different aspects were inseparable one from the other. So, to avoid this "take it or leave it", I suggest a basic distinction between two main sides of this conception. On one side, we could group together diverse *practices* which provide an effective emancipation to people who adopt them : free choice of husband or wife, arguments based on facts and reason rather than on authority and conformism, having a room for oneself, organisation of power offering possibilities of recourse or appeal, and many other practices. On the other side, we could gather not practices, but representations : *ideas of oneself* which are generally linked to the western conception of individual.

Considering this set of representations, we have another distinction to make : a distinction between true and false. Not an easy task, indeed,

because adequate representations are intimately intermingled with beliefs which, in fact, are mere fictions. This results from the fact that the western conception of individual derives from two sources, one which is secular, the other which is religious and theological. During the last centuries, philosophy, though claiming to be rational and secular, has intimately mixed these two sources.

In order to bring on the fore some of these beliefs, I will propose some reflections on to great icons of the modern western individual : Descartes and Robinson Crusoe.

First part : Descartes

I will not consider the real person of Descartes, but his *Meditations*, which present themselves as an autobiographical narrative telling the way Descartes made his metaphysical discoveries. The question I would like to answer is the following : *Why "I think, therefore I am" has become the most famous and emblematic philosophical quotation in the West?*

1 - Some words about an amazing philosophical narrative which announces the *Meditations* five hundred years before Descartes : *The Self-taught Philosopher*, by Ibn-Tufayl.

Ibn-Tufayl was an arabian philosopher and physician who lived in south of th Spain and Morocco during the XIIIe century. Descartes, i must precise, never read *The Self-taught Philosopher*, since it was translated in latin after his death. It is the story of a baby, alone on a desert island, who is nourished by a gazelle. This baby, for obvious reasons, doesn't learn any langage. Nevertheless, he he is able to think. He observes his environment, he makes experiences, he speculates, so than he rebuild by himself the whole set of scientific and philosophical knowledge that Ibn-Tufayl himself or any aristotelian philosopher of the XIIIe century could possess. Arrived at the age of 35 five years, the self-taught philosopher

understands that his internal being is made of a non-material substance, as God himself. So, he becomes a solitary mystic, finding his happiness in the contemplation of God.

This kind of philosophical novel clearly announces the purpose of Descartes, undertaking to erase all the dubious knowledges existing before himself in order to recreate a true knowledge from its own.

But there is also significant differences. I'll just point at one of them. Contrary to Descartes, Ibn-Tufayl doesn't believe he really recreates the knowledge. He just wants his reader to understand clearly the logical links which lead from a self-evident truth to another which is not self-evident. So, the story he tells, he overtly presents it as a fiction, which is just means to expose the whole chain of knowledge. At the same time, Ibn-Tufayl recognizes that he has inherited most of this knowledge from previous philosophers toward whom he is indebted : Aristotle, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina, Ibn-Bajja and Al-Ghazali. Even if his fictitious character is self-taught, Ibn-Tufayl himself his not and doesn't pretend he his. He clearly accepts the fact his own place depends on a lineage.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes tells a story, but a much more ambitious one. Contrary to Ibn-Tufayl, Descartes doesn't place self-accomplishment in God but in his own ability to build an all-embracing knowledge. For this reason, he presents himself as the true hero of the story he tells. For this reason also, he asserts he is indebted toward nobody except God, since, he recognizes, God made him and laid down some seminal ideas in his mind. Descartes admits, which is very humble, that he has not created himself (had he created himself, he would have given to himself all the divine perfections, and he admits that, actually, he has just some of them). So, was Descartes created by his parents? Descartes thinks he was not. His parents just gave him his body, but the essence of himself, his soul, he had it directly from God.

Just as Descartes denies his familial lineage, he denies also his philosophical inheritance. When, for instance, a reader pointed at some analogy between some ideas expressed by Descartes and a certain text of Saint Augustine, Descartes, in his answer, pretended he didn't know this text (which was false). In summary, though the *Meditations* are partly a fiction, Descartes presented them as a true story. This bold claim turned out to be a very good idea since, in fact, it has seduced a lot of academics who admire Descartes as if he were really a self-taught philosopher.

2 - Now, let us come to the famous formula itself, "*I think, therefore I am*". In spite of Descartes denial, this formula was prepared by a long philosophical history. I just give you some of the main milestones :

Saint Augustine. Even if I doubt, even if I am mistaken, I know with certainty that I am. I cannot be mistaken when I think I exist. These reflections of St A. are intimately linked with his speculations concerning the divine person. God knows himself. Under this respect, he is a person like us. Sure, there is an abyss between man and God ; however, having been created at the image of God, the human being has an immortal soul. To have a soul is to be a person. And to be a person is to know that one exists.

Ibn Sina (XIe c.) illustrates this internal certainty by means of a fiction. Suppose, he says, you are floating in the air, closed eyes, having no more sensations, and suppose you don't feel your own body. In such a situation, you would perceive nothing of the material world, but, assuredly, you go on perceiving your own immaterial soul. The self-taught philosopher imagined by Ibn-Tufayl has understood, too, that his essence was to know himself as an immaterial substance.

Anselm of Canterbury (XIe c.) develops the following proof of the existence of God : the idea of God is the idea of a being of an infinite perfection. If God did not exist, he would not be perfect. Therefore, the

very definition of God implies that he exists. Descartes will borrow this proof to Anselm. This so-called proof stresses the kinship between God and man : just as I cannot think that God doesn't exist, so, I cannot think I don't exist.

Hughes de Saint Victor (XIIe c.) takes up again the same ideas than Augustine and Ibn-Sina. But he insists on this one : that the act of thinking, considered in himself, is independant of any external reality and is a direct emanation of our immaterial soul.

Thomas of Aquina (XIIIe c.) firmly repeats the assertion that "Nobody can think that he does not exist".

Once replaced in this tradition, the famous formula of Descartes can be understood not with the fascinated reverence which is usually displayed by academics, but with some distance. It is true that Descartes points out the fact that any knowledge starts from the subject (a point which will be effectively of great importance for following philosophers, particularly Husserl). But there is another point, which is underlying and of which Descartes says nothing : in fact, being conscious doesn't suffice to provide us the sense of existing. Actually, if, for instance, I am depressed, the conscience I have of myself is the conscience of being nothing. In fact, it often happens that a human being think that he does not exist.

This leads to the conclusion that naked conscience - the conscience reduced to nothing else than itself - is not the experience of being a self-subsistant substance, but the experience of nothingness. So, it is vital for human beings to escape this fundamental suffering and not to be drowned in their own void. Descartes delivers a would-be remedy against this possibility. The remedy consists, firstly, in denying the void, secondly in defining conscience as a positive act providing by itself the sense of existing.

In asserting that "I think, therefore I am", Descartes points at a truth and, at the same time, provides a magic protection against the devastating implication of this truth. The source of the remedy, he finds it in God. Not in God considered as the Sovereign Good who will quench our thirst in Heaven, but God considered as the model in the resemblance of whom we are supposed to have been created. Indeed, the person of God needs nothing else than Himself for enjoying the sense of His own existing. Obviously, we, human beings, are placed in a contrasting state. Nevertheless, if, like Descartes does, we look at ourselves in the mirror of the divine person, we can take our desire for granted and believe that we have the same privilege.

Second part : Robinson Crusoe

Robinson Crusoe reflects the same fascination for the ideal of a self-existing person as Descartes *Meditations* do. However, the novel written by Defoe doesn't dream of accomplishment by thinking but by doing. Like Descartes, Robinson is absolutely freed from any links with others, but he realises himself not as the sovereign of a world of knowledge, but as the sovereign of a material world. During the medieval age and up to the French Revolution, the prevailing idea of the right order of the social world was this hierarchical chain : God- King- Father- Women and Children. Robinson Crusoe, like the philosophy of Locke, announces the new order : God - man- material things (the idea of a god-given dominion of man on the material world).

1 - In the western tradition, we find two main books telling the story of solitaries who are proposed as a model for the readers. The first one has been written during the fifth century : *The Lives of the Fathers of the Desert*. This work was immensely influential up to the eighteenth century.

The second one, *Robinson Crusoe*, must be considered as a protestant version of the first.

The holy hermits described in the fifth century book get out of the human links ordinary people have with their relatives : they dedicate themselves to the infinite debt they have towards Jesus, their Saviour. So, they attain a high degree of accomplishment, even though it is at a high cost since their terrestrial life consists in a constant struggle against carnal desires. Robinson seems to be engaged in a more favorable deal. Indeed, he is no more in relation with Jesus the crucified and with the overwhelming price which is to be paid for Redemption (no mention of Jesus can be found in the novel). As a Calvinist, he just has to feed himself with the speech of God. Moreover, he is assured that God has delegated to him a part of His dominion over the world. So, being free of any debt, Robinson can assert his terrestrial sovereignty. Under this respect, the modern secular subject remains deep-rooted in a theological soil.

2 - *Robinson* is not just a fictitious character. Given the role Robinson has played in the modern western imaginary, we must rather consider him as a semi-fiction proposed as a model to any reader dreaming of being truly oneself. It is clearly the message Rousseau gives in *Emile*, his treatise of education. For Rousseau, the primary model is no more Jesus, and the first book to read is no more the Bible : it is *Robinson Crusoe*. (See the passage of *Emile* in which Rousseau recommends the novel of Defoe).

We can find an indication of how much westerners have been seduced by the character of Robinson in the fact that, like Rousseau, most of the scholars who have written on this novel pay no attention to the sheer unlikeliness of this story : a man which remains absolutely alone during 25 years and who keeps up a perfect mental health. This amazing blindness reflects the desire westerners have to believe in their self as a

self-subsistent kernel, to believe in their psychic indestructibility, in spite of the daily experience which provides multiple examples of the contrary.

Conclusion

Now, being nearly at the end of my little talk, I would like to make a distinction between two kinds of beliefs. I have tried to suggest that the western ideal of emancipation relies not only on pragmatic views and adequate representations, but also on delusory beliefs. Obviously, these beliefs are not perceived as such by the believers. For most of westerners, they are just evidences, they reflect the reality. So, these beliefs are different from overt religious beliefs. If, indeed, I believe in God or in Jesus-Christ, I know that this is my faith and I am aware that this faith is not self-evident for everybody. But if one believes that the subject is self-subsistent, is a natural kernel utterly distinct from its social roles and its social environment, one doesn't consider this as a belief but as an evidence. Moreover, I must precise that sharing this belief doesn't oblige to think that the metaphysics of Descartes are really true : it just implies that one doesn't think that metaphysics of Descartes are clearly false. Sharing this belief doesn't oblige to consider the story of Robinson Crusoe as really plausible, but just as being not quite unlikely. The thing is not an assumed and conscious faith, one must rather label it as a half-belief.

For this reason, these half-beliefs are shared not only by naive people but by scholars as well. We could find an example of that in the sophisticated philosophical fiction of a state of nature, that is to say the idea that individuals logically preexist to social life. The scientific attainments show that social life is the natural state for human species as it is for apes, so that, actually, social life precedes individuals. But,

despite this knowledge, renowned political philosophers go on with reasonments based on the hypothesis of an individual subject preexisting to any social links. This conception of individual is one of the roots of Human Rights. Sure, Human Rights have also another source, which is a moral sentiment shared by many people around the world, the moral sentiment which, for instance, is expressed by Kong Fu Tseu when he recommands : Don't do to others what you wouldn't want others do to yourself. But Human Rights are not only rooted in this general sentiment, they reflect also a specific conception of man, considered as endowed with natural rights that not derive from his social existence. So, I am convinced that a really secular conception of human condition would confirm our moral sentiment. But I am not sure it would confirm the western conception of individual natural rights.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that what is fundamentally at stake for philosophy in the long run is to elaborate a really secular coneption of human condition. It is to achieve the separation between religion and philosophy, it is to find a way out of the dualistic discourse in which the whole western history of philosophy has been embedded (by dualistic discourse, in short, I mean any discourse based on the idea that human beings could have the good without the bad, could transcend there material and social life and reach a kind of Salvation or Plenitude - which, I think, must be considered as a religious prospect and not a philosophical one). This philosophical task implies as well the task of rethinking emancipation in a less heroic and promethean way, and to ground it on a more realistic vision of human condition.