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Mirror and blindness: metaphorical signs of knowledge

A sign is something in place of the object, able to transmit its significance or message to an interpreting organism or instrument. Representation by sign can take diverse forms depending upon the relation between sign and represented object, and can be an *icon* (similarity in form), *indicator* (cause and effect) or *symbol* (arbitrary convention). Words are symbols or cultural *memes* produced and reproduced in the mind, and constitute the basic elements of language and thought.

Excepting onomatopoeia and some verbal expressions, words normally do not possess a precise meaning when used separately. The same word can have diverse meanings, and in order to give a sense to concrete and abstract things, words must function as a set. The words "mirror" and "blindness", for instance, do not say much when isolated, but presented in a given context, forming phrases, they represent not one or two but a whole world of signs. These two words serve to reflect upon their significance in language and as metaphors of human knowledge.

A mirror is a regular polished surface with a metallic background able to reflect the image of objects. The mirror surface enables a revealing and unique experience: our reflected image is perceived as if we were "somebody else" that observes and judges us. But the "else" is not another one (it is our image) nor ourselves (how can we occupy two places at once?).

The mirror image can be compared to a reflection of the world's reality on our life experience, or to the reflection of our life experience on the reality of the world. Whatever the alternative in this tempting duality, one manner to express this reality is the metaphor of a large and perennial river where our personal experiences flow together, as small springs, to interconnect the great stream of history and empty into the immense ocean of life. The images of the real and the imaginary intermingle and fuse, leading to a unique reality.

The mirror image can be associated also to the set of acquired knowledge that, as solid as it may appear, lacks strength even in the case of exact or hard sciences. Yesterday's knowledge is transformed into today's ignorance and tomorrow everything becomes different. Science itself makes the change and alternation of concepts its operational objective; its mission or, better, its own nature consists of unending tests to refute the truths it proclaims.

The metaphorical image of a constantly changing knowledge can be a punishment to certain intellectuals who consider themselves solidly knowledgeable or part of an elite, because of their titles and medals, or even superior to common men. This does not sustain itself, since ignorance increases in the same proportion as knowledge increases. As more is learned, there is more to learn. This is valid for the generalist who tends to know little about everything and, more so, for the specialist who tends to know everything about very little.

The sign "blindness" can be invoked as a reference to the myth of Cosmo, orderly and commanding, born from Chaos, dark mist that reveals the lack of light and where mirrors are good for nothing. Blindness can be associated to the platonic myth of the cavern, indicator of obscure ignorance, repetitious of old opinions or "doxa" and afterwards redeemed by the brilliance of reason, reasoning and logic.

Blindness denotes the incompetence of living organisms to visually capture the images projected by surrounding objects. Literally, it is a sign of visual incapacity, but from an ontological and human point of view it can be a distinctive signal of the capacity that certain creatures have to interact with the world in a different way, admirable and perhaps more creative than that of people who possess vision. Examples are the legendary Homer,

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John Milton and Jorge Luis Borges, besides the many others that utilized their own blindness as inspiration for great works.

If blindness can or not exist, depending upon the angle of analysis, how can a definite sign be attributed to it? In this, as in all cases, signs only function jointly and change as much as the things they represent. Mirror and blindness are illusory signs, indicating that the reality they represent is as well.

Considering that we live mentally, socially and culturally immersed in a universe of signs that have been used for thousands of years, and also considering that knowledge, language and culture are collective conquests tied to the past as well as to the future and present, it has to be admitted that all signs complement themselves and that man evolves on the basis of changes in the signs that he creates and recreates, in an unceasing and unending process.

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