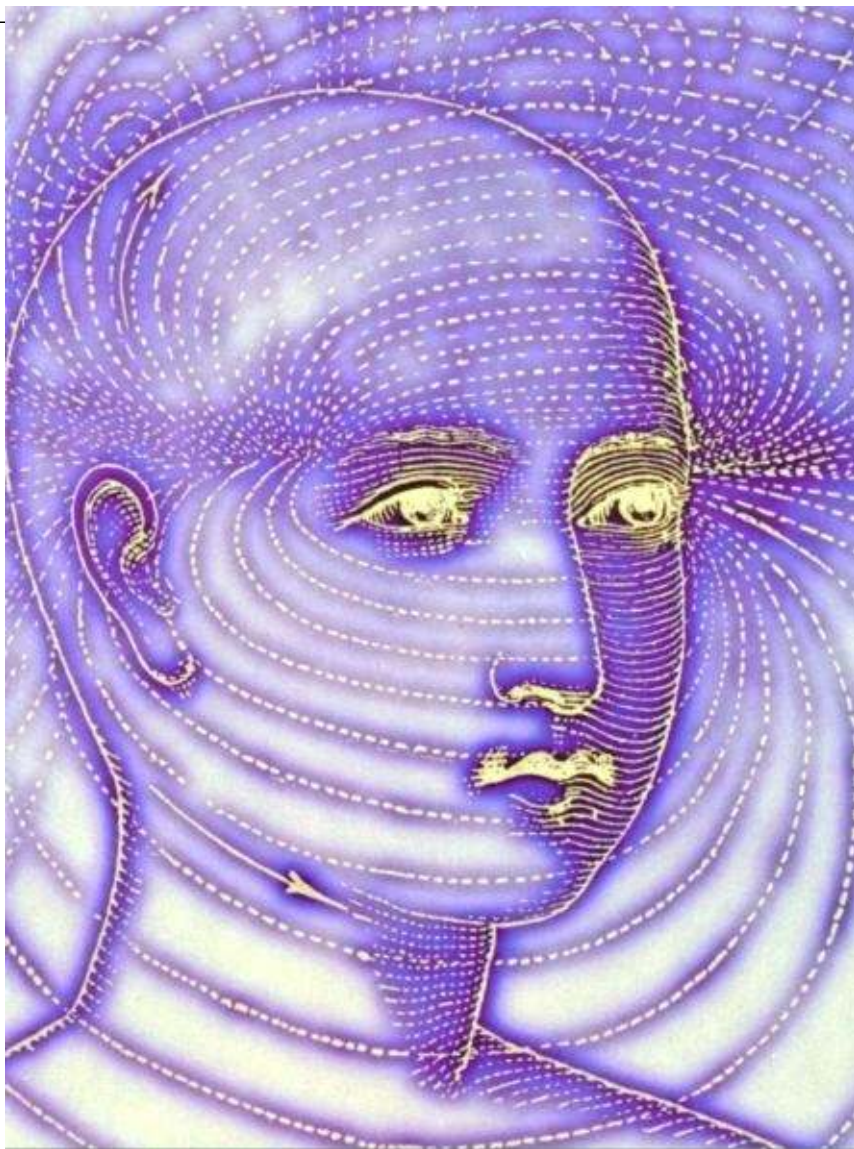




The Mind Made Flesh

FRONTIERS OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EVOLUTION

Nicholas Humphrey



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Nicholas Humphrey, School Professor at the London School of Economics and Professor of Psychology at the New School for Social Research, New York, is a theoretical psychologist internationally known for his work on the evolution of human intelligence and consciousness. His books include *Consciousness Regained*, *The Inner Eye*, *A History of the Mind*, and *Leaps of Faith*. He has been the recipient of several honours, including the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize and the British Psychological Society's book award.

The Mind Made Flesh

*Essays from the Frontiers of
Psychology and Evolution*

NICHOLAS HUMPHREY

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For Ada and Samuel

Preface

This is a volume of essays, lectures, journal entries, newspaper articles that I have written in response to opportunity, when something happened that set me thinking on new lines—a surprise turn in my life, a serendipitous discovery, a left-field thought, a provocation or an invitation that could not be refused. The themes are various and the lines do not all converge. Still, these chapters do have this in common: they all concern the uneasy relation between minds and bodies, and they all take issue with received ideas.

In 1983 Oxford University Press published a previous volume of my essays, under the title *Consciousness Regained: Chapters in the Development of Mind*. I wrote in the Preface: 'The theme that runs through this collection is a concern with why human beings are as they are ... The answers that most interest me are historical and evolutionary. Human beings are as they are because the history has been (so we may guess) as it has been.'

Twenty years—and four books—later, my interests are still centred in evolutionary psychology; a field which had yet to be named, but which has emerged as the most fertile field of all psychology. I have continued to be fascinated by the perennial issues: consciousness, justice, social understanding, spirituality. I hope I have better answers to some of the philosophical issues that puzzled me then. Some political and social problems have disappeared from view, others remain as pressing as ever, and new ones have emerged.

My grandfather, A. V. Hill, in the Preface to his own collected writings (*The Ethical Dilemma in Science*, 1960), quoted Samuel Johnson: 'Read over your compositions and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.' I cannot claim to have followed the advice to the letter. I am happy to be the author of most of what is in here (and, for those parts for which I am not, I can still offer good excuses). But I have taken the chance to strike out certain passages that I now reckon redundant, outdated, or wrong.

My constant companion in this work has been my wife, Ayla. My constant distraction has been the two rascals to whom this book is dedicated, Ada and Samuel. Daniel Dennett at Tufts University, Arlen Mack and Judy Friedlander at the New School, and Max Steuer at the I.S.F. have been good friends and critics at every stage. Shelley Cox, of Oxford University Press, and Angela Blackburn have been editors beyond compare.

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On Taking Another Look

'How often have I said to you,' Sherlock Holmes observed to Dr Watson, 'that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?' And how often do we need to be reminded that this is a maxim that is quite generally ignored by human beings?

Here is an immediate test to prove the point. Figure 1 shows a photograph of a strange object created some years ago in the laboratory of Professor Richard Gregory.² What do you see this as being a picture of? What explanation does your mind construct for the data arriving at your eyes?

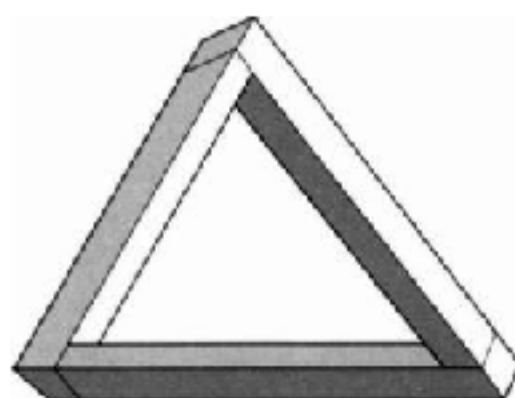


Fig. 1

You see it, presumably, as a picture of the so-called 'impossible triangle': that is, as a picture of a solid triangular object whose parts work perfectly in isolation from one another but whose whole refuses to add up to an object that could not possibly exist in ordinary three-dimensional space.

Yet the fact is that the object in the picture does exist in ordinary space. The picture is based on an unretouched photograph of a real object, taken from life, with no kind of optical trickery involved. Indeed, if you were to have been positioned where the camera was at the moment the shutter clicked, you would have seen the real object exactly as you are seeing it on the page.

What, then, should be your attitude to this apparent paradox? Should you perhaps (with an open mind, trusting your personal experience) believe what you unquestionably see, accept that what you always thought could not exist actually does exist, and abandon your long-standing assumptions about the structure of the 'normal' world? Or, taking heed of Holmes's dictum, would you do better instead to make a principled stand against impossibility and go in search of the improbable?

The answer, of course, is that you should do the second. For the fact is that Gregory, far from creating some kind of paranormal object that defies the rules of 3-D space, has merely created a perfectly normal object that defies the rules of human expectation. The true shape of Gregory's 'improbable triangle' is revealed from another camera position in Figure 2.

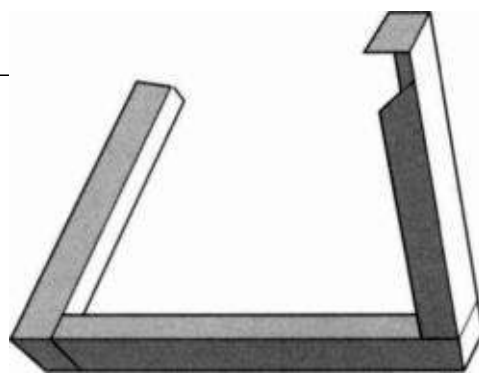


Fig. 2

It is, as it turns out, a most unusual object (there may be only a couple of such objects in existence in the universe). And it has been photographed for Figure 1 from a most unusual point of view (to get this first picture, the camera has had to be placed at the one-and-only position from which the object looks like this). But there it is. And now that you have seen the true solution, presumably you will no longer be taken in.

If only it were so! You look at Figure 2. And now you look back at Figure 1. What do you see this time around? Almost certainly, you still see exactly what you saw before: the impossibility rather than the improbability! Even when prompted in the right direction, you happily, almost casually, continue to 'make sense' of the data in a nonsensical way. Your mind, it seems, cannot help choosing the attractively simple-even if mad-interpretation over the unattractively complicated-even if sane-one. Logic and common sense are being made to play second fiddle to a perceptual ideal of wholeness and completion.

There are many examples in the wider world of human politics and culture where something similar happens: that is to say, where common sense gets overridden by some kind of seductive simple explanatory principle-ethical, political, religious, or even scientific. For, if there is one thing that human beings are amazingly prone to (perhaps we might say good at), it is in emulating the camera operator who took the photograph of Figure 1 and manoeuvring themselves into just the one ideological position from which an impossible, even absurd, explanation of the 'facts of life' happens to look attractively simple and robust.

This special position may be called, for example, Christianity, or Marxism, or Nationalism, or Psychoanalysis-maybe even some forms of science, or scientism. It may be an ideological position that appeals only to some of the human population some of the time or one that appeals to all of the population all of the time. But whichever it is, to those people who, in relation to a particular problem are currently emplaced in this position, this will almost certainly seem to be the only reasonable place there is to be. 'Here I stand,' in the words of Martin Luther; 'I can do no other.' And the absolute rightness of the stance will seem to be confirmed by the very fact that it permits the welcome solution to the problem that it does.

Yet the telltale sign of what is happening will always be that the solution works only from this one position, and that if the observer were able to shift perspective, even slightly, the gaps in the explanation would appear. Of course, the trick-for those who want to keep faith and save appearance

is not to shift position, or to pull rapidly back if ever tempted.

The lesson is that when would-be gurus offer us final answers to any of life's puzzles, a way of looking at things that brings everything together, the last word on 'how things are', we should be watchful. By all means, let us say: 'Thank you, it makes a pretty picture.' But we should always be prepared to take another look.

One Self: A Meditation on the Unity of Consciousness

I am looking at my baby son as he thrashes around in his crib, two arms flailing, hands grasping randomly, legs kicking the air, head and eyes turning this way and that, a smile followed by a grimace crossing his face ... And I'm wondering: what is it like to be him? What is he feeling now? What kind of experience is he having of himself?

Then a strong image comes to me. I am standing now, not at the rail of a crib, but in a concert hall at the rail of the gallery, watching as the orchestra assembles. The players are arriving, section by section—strings, percussion, woodwind-taking their separate places on the stage. They pay little if any attention to each other. Each adjusts his chair, smooths his clothes, arranges the score on the rack in front of him. One by one they start to tune their instruments. The cellist draws his bow darkly across the strings, cocks his head as if savouring the resonance, and slightly twists the screw. The harpist leans into the body of her harp, runs her fingers trippingly along a scale, relaxes and looks satisfied. The oboist pipes a few liquid notes, stops, fiddles with the reed and tries again. The tympanist beats a brief rally on his drum. Each is, for the moment, entirely in his own world, playing only to and for himself, oblivious to anything but his own action and his own sound. The noise from the stage is a medley of single notes and snatches of melody, out of time, out of harmony. Who would believe that all these independent voices will soon be working in concert under one conductor to create a single symphony.

Now, back in the nursery, I seem to be seeing another kind of orchestra assembling. It is as if, with this baby, all the separate agencies of which he is composed still have to settle into place and do the tuning up: nerves need tightening and balancing, sense organs calibrating, pipes clearing, airways opening, a whole range of tricks and minor routines have to be practised and made right. The subsystems that will one day be a system have as yet hardly begun to acknowledge one another, let alone to work together for one common purpose. And as for the conductor who one day will be leading all these parts in concert into life's Magnificat: he is still nowhere to be seen.

I return to my question: what kind of experience is this baby having of himself? But, as I ask it, I realize I do not like the answer that suggests itself. If there is no conductor inside him yet, perhaps there is in fact no self yet, and if no self perhaps no experience either—perhaps nothing at all.

If I close my eyes and try to think like a hard-headed philosophical sceptic, I can almost persuade myself it could be so. I must agree that, in theory, there could be no kind of consciousness within this little body, no inner life, nobody at home to have an inner life. But then, as I open my eyes and look at him again, any such scepticism melts. Someone in there is surely looking back at me, someone smiling, someone seems to know my face, someone is reaching out his tiny hand . . . Philosophers think one way, but fathers think another. I can hardly doubt sensations are registering inside this body, willed actions initiating, memories coming to the surface. However disorganized his life may be, he is surely not totally unconscious.

Yet I realize I cannot leave it there. If these experiences are occurring in the baby boy, they presumably have to belong to an experiencer. Every experience has to have a corresponding subject.

whose experience it is. The point was well made by the philosopher Gottlob Frege, a hundred years ago: ~~it would be absurd, he wrote, to suppose that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about the world without a bearer, independently.~~ An experience is impossible without an experient. The inner world presupposes the person whose inner world it is."

But if that is the case, I wonder what to make of it. For it seems to imply that those 'someones' that I recognize inside this boy-the someone who is looking, the someone who is acting, the someone who is remembering-must all be genuine subjects of experience (subjects; note the plural). If indeed he does not yet possess a single Self-that Self with a capital S which will later mould the whole system into one - then perhaps he must in fact possess a set of relatively independent sub-selves, each of which must be counted a separate centre of subjectivity, a separate experienter. Not yet being one person, perhaps he is in fact many.

But, isn't this idea bizarre? A lot of independent experienters? Or-to be clear about what this has to mean-a lot of independent consciousnesses? And all within one body? I confess I find it hard to see how it would work. I try to imagine what it would be like for me to be fractionated in this way and simply cannot make sense of the idea.

Now, I agree that I myself have many kinds of 'lesser self' inside me: I can, if I try, distinguish a part of me that is seeing, a part that is smelling, a part raising my arm, a part recalling what day it is and so on. These are certainly different types of mental activity, involving different categories of subjective experience, and I am sure they can properly be said to involve different dimensions of my Self.

I can even agree that these parts of me are a relatively loose confederation that do not all have to be present at one time. Parts of my mind can and do sometimes wander, get lost, and return. When I have come round from a deep sleep, for example, I think it is even true that I have found myself having to gather myself together-which is to say my selves together piecemeal.

Marcel Proust, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, provides a nice description of just this peculiar experience: 'When I used to wake up in the middle of the night,' he writes,

not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness ... But then ... out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, of shirts with turned-down collars, I would gradually piece together the original components of my ego.'

So it is true, if I think about this further, that the idea of someone's consciousness being dispersed in different places is not completely unfamiliar to me. And yet I can see that this kind of example will hardly do to help me understand the baby. For what distinguishes my case from the baby's is precisely that these 'parts of me' that separate and recombine do not, while separate, exist as distinct and self-sufficient subjects of experience. When I come together on waking, it is surely not a matter of merely bringing together various sub-selves that are already separately conscious. Rather, these sub-selves only come hack into existence as and when I plug them back, as it were, into the main me.

As I stand at the crib watching my baby boy, trying to find the right way in, I now realize I am u

against an imaginative barrier. I will not say that, merely because I can't imagine it, it could make no sense at all to suppose that this baby has got all those separate conscious selves within him. But I will say I do not know what to say next.

Yet, I am beginning to think there is the germ of some real insight here. Perhaps the reason why I cannot imagine the baby's case is tied into that very phrase, 'I can't imagine . . .'. Indeed, as soon as I try to imagine the baby as split into several different selves, I make him back into one again by virtue of imagining it. I imagine each set of experiences as my experiences-but, just to the extent that they are all mine, they are no longer separate.

And doesn't this throw direct light on what may be the essential difference between my case and the baby's? For doesn't it suggest that it is all a matter of how a person's experiences are owned- whom they belong to?

With me it seems quite clear that every experience that any of my sub-selves has is mine. And, to paraphrase Frege, in my case it would certainly make no sense to suppose that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about my inner world without the bearer in every case being me! But maybe with the baby every experience that any of his sub-selves has is not yet his. And maybe in his case it does make perfect sense to suppose that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about inside his inner world without the bearer in every case being him.

How so? What kind of concept of 'belonging' can this be, such that I can seriously suggest that while my experiences belong to me, the baby's do not belong to him? I think I know the answer intuitively; yet I need to work it through.

Let me return to the image of the orchestra. In their case, I certainly want to say that the players who arrive on stage as isolated individuals come to belong to a single orchestra. As an example of 'belonging', this seems as clear as any. But, if there is indeed something that binds the players together, what kind of something is this?

The obvious answer would seem to be the one I have hinted at already: that there is a 'conductor'. After each player settles in and has his period of free play, a dominant authority mounts the stage, lifts his baton, and proceeds to take overall control. Yet, now I am beginning to realize that this image of the conductor as 'chief self' is not the one I want-nor, in fact, was it a good or helpful image to begin with.

Ask any orchestral player, and he'll tell you: although it may perhaps look to an outsider as if the conductor is totally in charge, in reality he often has a quite minor-even a purely decorative-role. Sure, he can provide a common reference point to assist the players with the timing and punctuation of the playing. And he can certainly influence the overall style and interpretation of a work. But that is not what gets the players to belong together. What truly binds them into one organic unit and creates the flow between them is something much deeper and more magical, namely, the very act of making music: that they are together creating a single work of art.

Doesn't this suggest a criterion for 'belonging' that should be much more widely applicable: that parts come to belong to a whole just in so far as they are participants in a common project?

Try the definition where you like: what makes the parts of an oak tree belong together—the branches, roots, leaves, acorns? They share a common interest in the tree's survival. What makes the parts of a complex machine like an aeroplane belong to the aeroplane—the wings, the jet engines, the radar? They participate in the common enterprise of flying.

Then, here's the question: what makes the parts of a person belong together—if and when they do? The clear answer has to be that the parts will and do belong together just in so far as they are involved in the common project of creating that person's life.

This, then, is the definition I was looking for. And, as I try it, I immediately see how it works in my own case. I may indeed be made up of many separate sub-selves, but these selves have come to belong together as the one Self that I am because they are engaged in one and the same enterprise: the enterprise of steering me—body and soul—through the physical and social world. Within this large enterprise each of my selves may indeed be doing its own thing: providing me with sensory information, with intelligence, with past knowledge, goals, judgements, initiatives, and so on. But the point—the wonderful point—is that each self doing its own thing shares a final common path with all the other selves doing their own things. And it is for this reason that these selves are all mine, and for that reason that their experiences are all my experiences. In short, my selves have become co-conscious through collaboration.

But the baby? Look at him again. There he is, thrashing about. The difference between him and me is precisely that he has as yet no common project to unite the selves within him. Look at him. See how he has hardly started to do anything for himself as a whole: how he is still completely helpless, need-dependent—reliant on the projects of other people for his survival. Of course, his selves are beginning to get into shape and function on their own. But they do not yet share a final common path. And it is for that reason his selves are not yet all of them his, and for that reason their experiences are not yet his experiences. His selves are not co-conscious because there is as yet no co-laboration.

Even as I watch, however, I can see things changing. I realize the baby boy is beginning to come together. Already there are hints of small collaborative projects getting under way: his eyes and his hands working together, his face and his voice, his mouth and his tummy. As time goes by, some of these miniprojects will succeed; others will be abandoned. But inexorably over days and weeks and months he will become one coordinated, centrally conscious human being. And, as I anticipate this happening, I begin to understand how in fact he may be going to achieve this miracle of unification. It will not be, as I might have thought earlier, through the power of a supervisory Self who emerges from nowhere and takes control, but through the power inherent in all his sub-selves for, literally, their own self-organization.

Then, stand with me again at the rail of the orchestra, watching those instrumental players tuning up. The conductor has not come yet, and maybe he is not ever going to come. But it hardly matters: for the truth is, it is of the nature of these players to play. See, one or two of them are already beginning to strike up, to experiment with half-formed melodies, to hear how they sound for themselves, and remarkably—to find and recreate their sound in the group sound that is beginning to arise around them. See how several little alliances are forming, the strings are coming into register, and the same is happening with the oboes and the clarinets. See, now, how they are joining together across different sections, how larger structures are emerging.

Perhaps I can offer a better picture still. Imagine, at the back of the stage, above the orchestra, a lone dancer. He is the image of Nijinsky in *The Rite of Spring*. His movements are being shaped by the sounds of the instruments, his body absorbing and translating everything he hears. At first his dance seems graceless and chaotic. His body cannot make one dance of thirty different tunes. Yet something is changing. See how each of the instrumental players is watching the dancer looking to find how, within the chaos of those body movements, the dancer is dancing to his tune. And each player, in turn, seems, now wants the dancer to be his, to have the dancer give form to his sound. But see how, in order to achieve this, each must take account of all the other influences to which the dancer is responding-how each must accommodate to and join in harmony with the entire group. See, then, how at last, this group of players is becoming one orchestra reflected in the one body of the dancer-and how the music they are making and the dance that he is dancing have indeed become a single work of art.

And my boy, Samuel? His body has already begun to dance to the sounds of his own selves. Sooner or later, enough, as these selves come together in creating him, he too will become a single, self-made human being.

What Is Your Substance, Whereof Are You Made?

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit,
Is poorly imitated after you;
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.
Speak of the spring, and foison of the year;
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
The other as your bounty doth appear,
And you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 1.111

This is a poem, it has been said, of 'abundant flattery'. But not displeasing, I imagine, to the young Earl of Southampton to whom it was probably addressed. Shakespeare had earlier compared him to summer's day. Now, for good measure, he tells him he combines the promise of spring and the bounty of autumn. He is not only the most beautiful of men—the very picture of Adonis with whom the goddess Venus fell in love—but the equal of Helen, the most beautiful of women, too. What is he made of? Spring, autumn, Adonis, Helen ... What a piece of work he must have been!

Yes, what a piece of work. We read the poem, at first encounter, as if Shakespeare meant it as straightforward tribute to his friend. But there is not much in Shakespeare's sonnets which is straightforward, and scarcely a line which is simply what it seems.

He is clever, Shakespeare. And he expects us to be clever too. In the very first phrases he hints at a more subtle interpretation of the poem. 'What is your substance, whereof are you made, / that millions of strange shadows on you tend?' Substance and shadow. The reference is to a famous parable in Plato, the story of 'The Cave'.

Imagine, Plato suggests in *The Republic*, that we are in a cave with a great fire burning behind us whose light casts on the wall our shadows and the shadows of everything else around us. We are chained there facing the wall, unable to look round. We see those dancing shadows, we see life passing in outline before our eyes, but we have no knowledge of the solid reality that lies behind. And so—like a child whose only experience of the world comes through watching a television screen—we come to believe that the shadows themselves are the real thing.

The problem for all of us, Plato implies, is to recognize that beneath the surface of appearance

there may exist another level of reality. We see a thing now in this light, now in that. We hear a poem read with this emphasis or that. But every example that reaches our senses is at best an ephemeral and patchy copy, a shadow-and one shadow only-of the transcendental reality behind. Everything and everyone 'has, every one, one shade', and none can reveal all aspects of itself at once.

Except, it seems, for Shakespeare's friend: a being who, contrary both to philosophy and natural law, can 'every shadow lend'. A man seen simultaneously by the light of a hundred fires. A poem read in a hundred ways. A shocking new form of a man. As if, among the cut-out portraits, the flat silhouettes which line our shadow-theatre wall, we were to come across a Cubist painting-a portrait by Picasso or by Braque.

Early last century the Cubist painters attempted quite deliberately to overcome the limitations of a single point of view. They took, say, a familiar object-a guitar-broke it apart and portrayed it on the canvas as if it were being seen from several different sides. Calculatedly lending to the object 'every shadow', they hoped that the essence, the inner substance of the object, would shine through. They took a human face and did the same.

But theirs was only the most literal-perhaps the most brutal-attempt to break the chains of Plato's cave. If the Cubists knew the problem, Leonardo da Vinci knew it too. If the Cubists solved it by superimposing different points of view, so in another sense did Leonardo. If a hundred shadows tend upon Braque's Lady with Guitar, surely a thousand tend upon the Mona Lisa.

'Hers is the head upon which "all the ends of the world are come"'-the words are the critic Walter Pater's.

All the thoughts and experience of the world are etched and moulded there: the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen days about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary.'

Leonardo, in making a portrait of a Florentine merchant's wife, has given us a picture of someone with the power to represent all ways of existing to all men. Now Shakespeare, in writing to an Elizabethan youth, tells us of just such another one.

And tells us, in other poems, that he is in love with him. Alas, poor Shakespeare! To love, and ask for love, from such a complicated being-or rather such a complicated nest of different beings is foolish as to try to play a simple serenade on Braque's guitar.

Such charismatic prodigies-the Mona Lisa, Shakespeare's friend, or, in our own time, Nijinska, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe-may have an almost magical attraction. But the spell they exert is the spell that Stanislavski called 'stage charm'. By face, by manner, by voice and personality they hint every possible existence; but never do they finally confirm or deny a single one of them. All things to all people, but never at last the capacity to be any particular thing to anyone.

Such men-such women too, of course-are dangerous. So dangerous that Plato himself in describing his ideal Republic recommended that we ban them from the city gates. And if Shakespeare knew Plato's story of the cave, he also very likely knew of Plato's warning. 'If any such man,' Plato writes 'who has the skill to transform himself into all sorts of characters and represent all sorts of things shall come to us to show us his art, we shall anoint him with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head ... and send him away to another city.'²

Shakespeare, in the other sonnets, chides, rails, complains against his friend. But at no time has he the courage to send the man away.

Yet Shakespeare knew-none better-the trouble he was in. The poem in its deeper meaning is not a poem of 'abundant flattery'. It's a lament.

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