

Refl' Action

Reflection: thought, judgment, and criticism

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Reflection, between thought, judgment, and criticism

In the previous article¹, we retraced the history of the evolution of the concept of reflection. In different authors and eras, we have seen how the idea of reflection has imposed itself in the history of thought and action as the cornerstone of human evolution. This concept can be confused with other terms in everyday life that, although similar, do not give back all its complexity.

To investigate the peculiarities of an individual's reflection, both from an intrapersonal and interpersonal point of view, we want to preliminarily review some definitions of terms related to the concept of reflection but which cannot and must not replace it. Following this survey, we will try to highlight the peculiarities of reflecting and what, thanks to its specificity, this action brings to the individual as a person and as part of a group, family, or community.

It will not be possible to exhaust the meaning and the innumerable relationships concerning the terms mentioned. Still, this article will try to underline the most significant aspects to offer different exciting and valuable inputs for developing new reflective practices or a greater understanding of pre-existing ones.

¹ [The meaning and value of reflection](#)

Thinking, self-analysis, judgment, and criticism

Let's imagine we are talking with a dear friend who confides in us that he is in a very complex personal situation. He finds himself at a crossroads and does not know which road to choose. A bit of generic but handy advice could be "Reflect carefully before making a choice." What do we mean? We are certainly inviting him to think, but in what sense? To think about what? And above all, in this case, what is thought?

In the encyclopedia, *thinking* is the activity with which a human takes of himself and the reality around him, an activity thanks to which he can grasp the universality of a concept, going beyond the mere perception of the senses. Yet, it is also through the senses that man collects the data necessary for thought. There is only one concept that cannot be thought of, and that is the one that does not exist.

It comes from the Latin "*pensum*²," which is the participle of the verb "*pendere*," which not surprisingly means "to weigh." The Latins used the verb to indicate the amount of wool needed before it was passed to the spinners who would have treated it. It is, therefore, something necessary, a raw material not yet processed, beneficial for human life in all its facets. Once again, the etymology brings us back to the first crucial aspect of the term. Thought, at its root, is something essential but at the same time still shapeless. Without further action, it remains a beneficial element, but one that needs something more. The transition to the philosophical meaning of the term is immediate. Thinking is a simple tool capable of making countless complex, functional, beautiful, or ugly objects.

So, the thought manifests itself, complicates, is made explicit, and realized based on its horizon. The activity of thinking underestimates or forgets to refer to a specific horizon. It stumbles upon what we usually refer to with the term *Over thinking*³, thinking without a clear horizon, which turns into a trap with no way out—the action of thinking too much, not in a quantitative but a qualitative sense. And the risk is to spin splendid wool without being able to create neither a blanket nor a dress, but only a lot of effort in the hands of the spinner.

Aware of this, human in their evolution has developed different linguistic codes and ways of designing their thinking and directing it towards their purpose. Let us mention one, the collection of data implying another helpful term for our purpose: analysis, or instead here, self-analysis. In psychology, self-analysis is defined as an examination that a subject carries out on himself. Therefore, self-analysis is a form of thought addressed by man to himself to maintain an active awareness of his actions and emotional state.

² [Vocabulary for pensum](#)

³ [To know about](#)

In this case, the horizon is no longer fundamental; it is more than specific; self-care. Unlike thought, whether it is a conscious or unconscious one is inevitable for man, self-analysis is configured as a choice. If pursued consistently and competently, it helps the individual acquire awareness, self-esteem, and the ability to recognize the most diverse aspects of his personality.

Very often, despite the presence of the "self," which emphasizes the individual's relationship with himself and not with another, the self-analysis is developed thanks to external support. During the research relating to the first article proposed as part of *Refl'Action*⁴, reflection is a highly personal fact for some. In contrast, for others, reflection is impossible to think without reference to a reality external to the individual. So, reflection is not something thinkable beyond the relationship between several individuals.

Concerning self-analysis, this can be an exciting starting point. This practice is configured as a constant, honest, and procedural dialogue of individual X with a highly complex and splendid personal Y who lives inside X. Not that the interiority of a person is separable from the person himself⁵. But it is interesting to read a dialogue with oneself in the light of a crucial fact: each of us tends to think that we know each other thoroughly but does not know our ability to think, relate or feel emotions any more than we see the shape of the individual veins and arteries that make up your circulatory system. We know they exist; sometimes, we know how they work, but we've never seen them, touched them, or talked to each other until we decide to dedicate ourselves to discover them. And perhaps this is one of the essential aspects of self-analysis; its very existence reminds us in a loud voice of the importance of never ceasing to investigate ourselves.

Judgment. We can start by talking about the condemnation of judgment—a term mortified by everyday use, which is usually viewed with arrogance and negativity. Judgments and prejudices are often seen as negative aspects of human thinking. Nothing more superficial or wrong. From the Latin *iudicium*⁶, derived from the noun *iudex*, the term referred in its most ancient meaning to the activities carried out by the judge, the *iudex*, which means that it is still used today in the context of the law. In philosophy, judgment is a logical function that connects, affirming or denying, a subject with a predicate and is expressed in its different application possibilities. So, it is possible to speak of analytical, synthetic, a priori or posterior, empirical or aesthetic judgments, etc. In common parlance, judgment is a simple affirmation, which is not limited to ascertaining a fact, but at the same time expressing an opinion on the quality,

⁴ [To find out more, visit our website](#)

⁵ P. Jhonson, *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner*, Routledge, 2014

⁶ [Vocabulary for iudicium](#)

value, or merit of something or someone⁷. And it is in the definition given by shared language, that the mistrust that we tend to attribute to the term winds its way, where opinion is often something simple to discredit or, in any case, an aspect of the mental capacity of individuals that is repeatedly underestimated.

One of the most exciting and valuable aspects of this research is the ability to express opinions, superficial or profound, that one wishes to consider. The ability to judge an individual can be beneficial for understanding the individual himself. Innumerable factors are involved in the ability to judge. The reality of belonging of the individual, social background, education, and passions motivate his existence, relationships, and vision of the world. A judgment is always a fruit. And the fact that it can also be poisonous, therefore perhaps negative, does not make fruitless essential, beautiful, or valuable. So maybe it could be said that there are no absolute negative judgments, or rather, wrong judgments, only that there are judgments that must be understood in the light of those who express them and in the horizon in which they are cast.

Logically, from a semantic or meaning point of view, there is no mistake in using the expression "a fair or unfair judgment," but it must undoubtedly be weighed. In the light of what we want to obtain from that judgment, in the light of the skills of those who express it, and finally, in the light of the reality to which that judgment belongs. Because perhaps the only aspect of human existence that cannot be judged is judgment itself. Can we possibly tell someone they are wrong in saying "they don't like pizza" or "that movie wasn't deep enough"? We can always disagree and express different judgments; the only thing that man cannot do is expect that a decision on the judgment itself is universally accepted.

Closely related to the individual's ability to judge is the ability to criticize. Criticism is perhaps more misunderstood than judgment, sometimes confused with it, sometimes its synonym. Coming from the ancient Greek, κριτική⁸, it is defined as the intellectual faculty that makes man able to examine and evaluate every aspect of reality to be able to choose, select, express preferences, or make any necessary changes. The extremely evaluative nature of criticism has often made it pass for a faculty linked to the defect, the lack, which highlights the error and the negative aspects of the object on which it is poured.

In the various spheres in which criticism develops, both professional and personal, it is ignored by one of its most interesting aspects—that of being the faculty of improvement. A good ability to criticize makes the individual observe the world around

⁷ To learn more about the reviews, we recommend reading: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Translated by J. H. Bernard, New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951 and "Kant's System of Judicial Perspectives", Chapter IX of Stephen Palmquist, *Kant's System of Perspectives* (1993)

⁸ [Vocabulary for κριτικός](#)

him with attention and respect. The ability to know how to highlight the points of improvement. Let's take artistic criticism, for example, of a work does not devalue an artist's work; on the contrary, it allows this to grow and shine more in its splendour.

Once again, it is not the concept, the term, the faculty, or the action that carries an aspect of negativity within it, but the gaze that is addressed to it, influenced by an unaware use of the terms. So, a positive criticism is not a criticism that praises without pointing out any flaws. Positive criticism is criticism made with competence, attention, and consideration of all the elements that intervene in judging the object.

Analogies and differences

We have tried to describe the meaning and the most fundamental aspects of thought, judgment, and criticism. We aimed to highlight the differences and similarities between these concepts and the concept of reflection.

In the first article, we defined reflection as

...reflection as a human activity, which arises from the awareness of not having all the answers (like an admission of ignorance). Its purpose is to dissolve the doubts from which it arises (starting from a state of doubt). It is a process closely linked to the characteristics of the individual and the context of reference (that is, the nature of the reflection). Each reflection is a starting point for the next one; it is not a final process but a cyclical path⁹.

If we look at this definition in the light of the description of the previous terms, we should immediately notice some similarities. Like thought, reflection is referred to as human action. This is not something abstract or ethereal. Like the spinner, who uses that specific amount of wool, the reflection uses the data collected through experience to create new awareness, ideas, and learning. Like judgment, reflection is highly influenced by the specific characteristics of each individual, the reality that surrounds him, by the peculiarities that characterize him. Every reflection, it can be said, is influenced by personal opinions, even if it cannot be reduced to them.

Just like criticism, reflection arises from the admission of ignorance, of unawareness. We have seen how criticism is understood as a faculty in which the ability to observe, to collect data, to express evaluations, and to suggest improvements, intervenes. When an individual reflects, he is, in some way, always making a criticism of his thought, perception, and experience. And just as in the case of criticism, reflection collects the defects of a situation to make them future improvements. This seems to be the most profound meaning that we can attribute to learning: grasping what needs improvement, accepting it, and expanding it.

Retracing the analogies that reflection entertains with thought, judgment, and criticism allows us to highlight the differences. Or rather, the main difference is that reflection cannot be reduced to any of these terms, but each one intervenes in its way in what we define reflecting.

In the first part of this article, we talked about the apology of judgment. In some ways, criticism and judgment have also been described as something to be reevaluated. In reflection, this is a fundamental aspect. The re-evaluation of these terms allows us to look at the value of reflection in the interpersonal relationship context from a new point

⁹ [The meaning and value of reflection](#)

of view. Within a relationship, the exchange of criticisms, judgments, or, more simply, thoughts represents one of the starting points of the most common conflicts.

Thus reflection arises as to the tool capable of removing the exchange of judgments from the conflict. From the point of view, it is defined, just like thought, from its horizon. If the horizon of my criticism is to devalue the person to whom I am addressing it, I must admit that I am not making a criticism. I am devaluing. Suppose within a group; these concepts are applied correctly. In that case, a criticism formulated with competence and verbalized in a non-offensive way will improve the relationship and the intended goal. Because it is thanks to what reflection has in common with criticism, that it can be considered as a tool for improvement. Thanks to what criticism has in common with thought and not with overthinking, it allows the broadening of the horizons of those who put it into practice. Finally, it is thanks to what criticism has in common with the judgment that it succeeds in affirming itself as the privileged tool for developing real knowledge.

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