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Transfiguration of human consciousness and eternal life*

In the Christian religious tradition ‘transfiguration’ signifies the change of physical appearance of Jesus Christ. Together with other signs, transfiguration had to reveal His divinity but we may legitimately assume that it consisted not only in the change of physical appearance of Jesus but also entailed essential changes in His conscious relation to himself, to the world of things and to other persons. But is it not so that the problems concerning transfiguration of Jesus are totally closed to philosophical analysis because we have no access even to a few features of His transfigured consciousness? One can also argue that the evangelical transfiguration has its importance only for believers: it points to the excellence of God and promises that we will get some kind of direct knowledge of Him. Contrary to this objection, I am of the opinion that there are speculative (philosophical) means which allow us to reconstruct some features of transfigured consciousness.

Transfiguration of human consciousness, being the gate to eternal life, will consist in the following qualitative changes. Firstly, the opposition between appearances and reality will be canceled (opposition between appearances and ‘things in themselves’). Secondly, we will get experiential access to the relation between universality and particularity. Thirdly, human persons will become able to experience directly the way in which different kinds of objects transform into other objects. Fourthly, our relation to the fundamental features of the world will be changed: space and, more accu-

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rately speaking, spatiality will become internalized and time will change its structure. Fifthly, we will get direct access to our personal uniqueness and in this way we will achieve the ultimate explanation of our consciousness. By the formula ‘ultimate explanation of our consciousness’ I mean that we will get to know how our consciousness ‘flows’ from our personal uniqueness. Sixthly, the opposition between external and internal world will be canceled. All these changes will not only bring about knowledge of who we are, but also for the first time we will see the world, or, in other words, we will experience what the ‘world in itself’ looks like. These dramatic changes will be superior to the transformation which asemantic animal consciousness would have to undergo, if it were transformed into semantic human consciousness.

It is impossible in this article to describe and analyze all of the above mentioned aspects of transfigured consciousness and therefore I will concentrate on one problem, i.e. on the problem of direct experience of one’s own personal uniqueness.

What can motivate speculations concerning the nature of transfigured consciousness? I think that there are at least four such motivations. The existence of animal consciousness and the existence of human consciousness can motivate the idea that there are different stages of cognition (or different stages of knowledge) and also different world pictures. Our human consciousness is probably only one of many possible forms of experience of the world and it is the next stage immediately after animal conscious experience. As I will further suggest eternal life of human persons will consist in a higher form of conscious experience of the world when compared with animal experience and with our present form of cognition.

The second thing that can motivate considerations concerning transfigured consciousness can be derived from the problem of the so-called absolute consciousness. By ‘absolute consciousness’ I mean this ‘core’ of hu-

man consciousness which we call 'self' or 'ego'. This entity can be called 'absolute' because it evades every kind of experiential objectivization.

The third motivation consists in the fact that according to classical theism God is a conscious being but it seems almost obvious that in the case of God's consciousness we cannot formulate the problem of absolute consciousness: God knows His own absolute consciousness, He directly experiences His own ego or, in other words, He knows directly who He is.

The fourth motivation for philosophical considerations concerning transfiguration of human consciousness can be found in the problem of individuation of human persons and in the case of Christian theism in this context there also emerges the problem of individuation of persons belonging the Holy Trinity.

In addition to animal and human consciousness there is obviously one more kind of entity that deserves attention. What I have in mind here are pure spirits (angels). Because we assume that they are conscious creatures, pure spirits must have experiences of their own mental states which are somehow centered around something similar to the ego-center of human consciousness and pure spirits must also be capable of experiencing some kind of world. What kind of knowledge do they have at their disposal and especially what kind of knowledge do they have of their own individuality? G.A. McCool, in his book *From Unity to Pluralism. The Internal Evolution of Thomism* characterizes knowledge which God and these pure rational and conscious creatures have of themselves in the following way:

As pure spirits, God and the angels know their essences intuitively. Thus they are immediately aware of their connaturality with other beings and of the sympathetic love to which connaturalality gives birth. Man, the lowest of the spirits, is a form received in matter. Therefore he has no intuition of his essence. He is immediately aware neither of his connaturality with other beings

nor of his sympathy toward them. The imperfection of his self-awareness accounts for his deficient way of knowing other beings.¹

However, what did McCool have in mind when he wrote that angles and God know their essences intuitively? I would like to suggest that the ‘essence’ should be understood here as an ‘individual essence’ and that ‘intuitiveness’ that enables God and the angles to grasp their individual essences must be of a very peculiar kind, wholly unknown to us human persons and as such it must be different from the two fundamental types of intuition which we are familiar with: from perceptual intuition and from the intuition characteristic of our imagination.

I will begin with the problem of the semantic dimension of human consciousness. Consciousness, to the extent that we know its nature, is either simple phenomenal consciousness which reflects different objects in the world and reacts to many types of stimuli or consciousness is a phenomenal consciousness which is at same time self-consciousness. As we normally assume, many kinds of animals are equipped with simple phenomenal consciousness, but also human beings possess this kind of consciousness. But simple phenomenal consciousness characteristic of humans is dramatically different from animal phenomenal consciousness: animal consciousness is asemanitic, whereas human phenomenal consciousness and human self-consciousness are, as I would like to call it, semantically ‘saturated’.

It is not easy to say what semanticity itself is: everything that we have to do with in everyday life, everything that we are talking about in sciences, humanities, in religion, philosophy, theology is semantic, i.e. everything has some meaning and these meanings we can understand and interpret. We understand meanings of words, meanings of concepts, of sentences, meanings of indexical expressions (‘now’, ‘here’). But even so-called

¹ McCool, G.A. (1992). *From Unity to Pluralism. The Internal Evolution of Thomism*. New York: Fordham University Press 1992, 65.

syncategorematical expressions ('and', 'or') have meanings. But first of all, objects that surround us possess meanings: something in our perceptual field we interpret as a star, something other as a mountain, mouse trap, cell phone and so on.

If we put aside discussions concerning existence of ideal (platonian) meanings, then it is certain that meanings (semantic information) do not exist in themselves: if something has to have a meaning there must exist some conscious subject capable of understanding this meaning.

From the principal formal features which characterize semantic information I would like to name the following here. Semantic information is general, which means that concepts we possess enable us to overcome particularity of situations and particularity of perceptual images. Our concepts and beliefs (judgments) refer to what is general, to many situations, to many images, to many individual things, and even to unbounded classes of individuals.

Secondly, semantic information is susceptible to the distinction between truth and falsity. By using concepts we can form beliefs (judgments) and to these beliefs we can ascribe truth or falsity. Thirdly, semantic information is inferentially interconnected: from one kind of content it is possible to infer many other contents, from one concept other concepts. When I walk along the beach and see, say, a jellyfish, then starting from this content of my perception I can go to other contents, to contents such as: 'a creature living in the sea', 'a living creature in general' etc. This feature of our conscious mind enables us to overcome fleetingness of experiential data we constantly receive, makes possible to go from what is given in some determined situation to the unobservable things and in the end to form the idea of a world.

Admittedly, it is true that animal consciousness must somehow categorize stimuli which it receives but it does not categorize them semantically. Perhaps animal consciousness categorizes input which it receives with

the help of something similar to our human pictorial schemes or stereotypes, but animal stereotypes do not possess any semantic generality. They probably only have different levels of plasticity but plasticity is quite another thing than semantic generality. From this follows that animals are not aware that they are living in a world and therefore they do not know what kinds of beings they are.

Animal consciousness is not only devoid of any semantic dimension but it also does not have a self-conscious character. This means that it is not such a kind of consciousness in which all its contents would have some - active or passive - reference to one pole which we call subject or ego. It seems to me that self-consciousness is not possible without concepts, without some kind of access to semantic information: I am able to feel myself to be a subject of my own conscious states, I am able to feel myself to be some determined subject or ego only when I am able to know that I am a human being, that as such a creature I am different from rocks, plants, from animals, stars, clouds and from other human beings. What is important here is the fact that human phenomenal consciousness is always self-consciousness, which means that in every moment when we perceive objects in the world, in every moment when we are thinking of something everything which happens in our stream of consciousness is accompanied by conscious - clear or less clear - reference to the center of consciousness, to the ego, to the subject who we are.

Here however we encounter a fundamental problem which somehow should be solved by all attempts to describe and to understand the nature of human consciousness. Objects in the so-called external world perceived by our human consciousness, objects appearing to our self-consciousness, i.e. our mental states, the whole temporal structure of consciousness, and by this I mean the so-called 'stream of consciousness' with experiences of the changing present, with all the data of memory and with anticipations of future experiences and thoughts, even the ego itself - all these items become

conscious in a consciousness of a higher level and this higher level consciousness makes all these 'things' just conscious. What is however the real problem is this: it is not possible to grasp this absolute consciousness as an object. Absolute consciousness is not something which is extended in three dimensions of time, it is not something which has the structure of a stream, it is not something which is comprised of discernible mental states. As such this consciousness can be called absolute consciousness, although I would like to stress that we should try to get rid of all 'mystic' associations which this expression seems almost naturally to generate. This 'final' consciousness is absolute exclusively in the sense that it cannot be made conscious as an object but that it is just this consciousness which makes all other 'elements' of consciousness conscious.

To the structure of human semantic consciousness, both in its phenomenal aspect and in its self-conscious dimension, belongs also one more very important element, which can be called 'anticipation'. Anticipation functions in every mental act and consists in the directedness of human consciousness to the whole field of possible experience. Every act of our conscious mind 'non-thematically' aims at the totality of possible objects of cognition, every act anticipates being as an infinite totality and only in this way we can become conscious of determined objects of our experience. Anticipation arises not by generalization from what human conscious subjects have already encountered in the world but it belongs to their innate equipment and only through its particular processes of generalization become possible. In animal consciousness there are no traces of this peculiar activity of the human mind and this is why animals are not 'open to the world' and are, so to speak, 'closed' in particular situations which they encounter. Without anticipation objects of perceptual intuition would become something absolute and each epistemic act would be wholly externalized.

I would like to suggest that transfiguration of human consciousness will radically change the way we now categorize data of our experience. Not

only our experiential input will become wholly different from what we now receive but also modes of its categorization will change. These new modes will become so sophisticated that the future categorization rightly may be called trans-semantic. I am well aware that for many philosophers the idea of trans-semantic categorization will be very hard to swallow. They would say that trans-semantic categorization must inevitably lead to the idea of irrationality, because semanticity seems to be the only ground for human rationality. Contemporary antirealism has almost convinced us that the same set of data can be differently interpreted by applying different semantic tools and that each of these interpretations must lead to a different world or at least to a different picture of the world. But what I want to suggest here by introducing the concept of trans-semantic categorization is by far more radical: we do not envisage different sets of concepts applied to categorize some set of experiential data, but we try to imagine the possibility of overcoming semantic categorization altogether. We will become able to categorize the data that we will be receiving in such a radically different way from what we now have at our disposal that this will dramatically affect our experience and understanding of the world. Our future consciousness will be transformed in a way superior to the transformation which a-semantic animal consciousness would have to undergo, if it were transformed into semantic human consciousness. If animal consciousness could get human semantic tools to categorize its data, it would become able to see that it lives in a world and only in this way it could enter into communicative relations. We absolutely cannot imagine what amazing surprise it would be for animal consciousness to discover that it lives in the world in which human beings now live.

But this idea of future trans-semantic categorization should not be interpreted as a new form of antirealism, on the contrary, only through the medium of trans-semantic categorization human consciousness will become able to see the world in itself. I want to stress here that also other changes

mentioned by me at the beginning will be needed to see world in itself, namely, the ability to experience connection between generality and particularity, the ability to perceive how one kind of objects transforms into another kind of objects. How, for instance, some determined length of electromagnetic waves is transformed into a highly individual shade of blue. By using our current epistemic abilities we can perceive only sequences of events but we are not in a position to experience how one kind of things transforms into another kind of things.

It seems to me that this transformation of our experience, its transfiguration, as I call it here, is not only possible by means of a radically different way of categorizing the data of experience. There is also another possibility in this respect which I would like to call 'subtle experience' or 'total closeness' between the subject and the data it receives. The difference between trans-semantic categorization and this new 'subtle experience' would consist in the absence in the subtle experience of any categorizing apparatus whatsoever. This new kind of experience would consist in a very subtle differentiation of what is given, in a very subtle but cognitively important feeling. As such it will stand in total opposition to the famous 'raw feeling' which some contemporary epistemologists want to ascribe to small children.

When adult epistemic subjects perceive some shade of a blue color, then in order to grasp and to understand what they perceive they must have at their disposal not only the concept of blue, the concept of color but they also must be in possession of many, many other concepts: the concept of a spatially extended thing, the concept of smell as something different from the concept of color etc. According to some representatives of coherentist strand in contemporary epistemology very small children, who do not yet possess any concepts, are only able to feel the sensation of a blue color, but are not able to grasp and understand what they see. They feel, but they do not know what they feel. But it seems to me that in order to overcome this disability it is not necessary to develop an adult way of semantic categoriza-

tion. Another possibility would consist in a more subtle differentiation of experience itself. If each individual shade of a blue color could be felt with a very, very high precision, then cognition would consist in a pre-semantic discrimination or, more generally speaking, it would be a pre-categorical discrimination.

It seems to me that this idea is not one more example of academic speculation because already now, in our adult mode of experience we have to do with some traces of this 'absolute closeness' between the subject and the data it receives. When we now perceive some determined shade of a blue color and when we discriminate it from other shades of blue and from all other objects in the world, then we, so to speak, 'touch' something which transcends every kind of categorization. We consciously 'touch' individual essence of this shade of blue. If this very blurred contact with individual essences of all things would be sharpened to a very high degree, then we would be in full contact with all individual essences and we would also become able to experience how these individual essences interact with each other. In both cases, i.e. in the case of trans-semantic categorization and in the case of pre-categorical discrimination, the mechanism of anticipation would be functioning, but it would undergo an important modification: the world would cease to be experienced as something alien to us perceivers, we would understand everything that surrounds us.

And what would happen if the idea of such a radical transformation of our epistemic situation were applied to internal knowledge, to self-consciousness? As I already suggested, in such a case we will begin to experience our personal uniqueness, we will get to know who we are. The problem concerning our uniqueness or our individual essence seems to be one of the most difficult problems in philosophy and perhaps it is even the most difficult philosophical problem of all. What may we look like, what is the individual content that fills the shape of every person in a unique way? Is this a kind of sensuous content? Does it have some spatial shape? On the

one hand, it seems that a conscious subject, an ego, conceived as an entity different from its own stream of consciousness, cannot have any spatial appearance. On the other hand, the unique content of every person must be capable of having some shape, but this shape must be unique and as such it must be an adequate expression of the uniqueness of every particular person.

In this extremely difficult situation, where speculative theorizing touches its limits, only metaphors may be of some help. If we always lived surrounded by a deep darkness and if in this situation we had only tactual awareness at our disposal, would we be able to make even the slightest supposition that such a person as painted by Rafael in his *Madonna Tempi* is possible? Or that such a person as a famous Johannes Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* can exist? Speculations allowing the possibility of existence of non-tactual entities, made by some members of the 'tactual society', will be treated by its other members as completely empty, because 'to exist' would mean 'to be perceivable by touch' and 'to have tactual shape'. Every suggestion that shaped colors could exist would be treated by more soberly-disposed representatives of the tactual community as a cognitive nonsense. However, from our point of view visual shape is something so familiar and something so enormously obvious. It is also obvious to us that to some degree personal uniqueness can be expressed by talented painters by using colored visual shapes.

Through experiencing our own personal uniqueness we will become able to see how our consciousness of the world derives from this uniqueness. Our present mode of consciousness can be described as a distorted mirror not only because it cannot perceive things in themselves but also because our consciousness does not see its own ground. Either through trans-semantic categorization or through pre-semantic sharpening of experience we will see our individual essence. Seeing our individual essence will enable us to experience how from this essence flows the unique kind of our

conscious experience of the world. In this way transfiguration of consciousness will lead to the objectivization of absolute consciousness. Absolute consciousness will be filled up with our unique content - in a way that can be compared to the situation when a stained glass is filled up with light and thus produces unique colors. Human consciousness will not only see itself as seeing, which is already the case now, but first of all it will see itself as the source of its unique light.

Animal consciousness a-semantically feels the world but it does not see it and it also does not see itself. Human beings know semantically some aspects of the world, but they do not know themselves. God's consciousness knows directly all objects, but first of all God's consciousness knows itself. Transfiguration of human consciousness will imitate God's consciousness but the primary goal of this imitation will not be omniscience but communication with other persons. When we become able to see our individual essences we will also be able to perceive our unique relations to all other persons and all things. It seems to me that there are no other words which would better describe this new experience of the world than sympathy or love, but these are only words, i.e. only means which point to the future experience and knowledge. When we say that we are delighted with the beauty of some work of art, would we say that we love it? Maybe some of us would say this but at the same time these people would admit that such words as 'love' or 'sympathy' can only signal this unique delight which they feel every time. Transfigured consciousness will experience directly its unique relation to all objects. It will be in a position almost 'to paint' these relations, and then to retain their characteristics in memory.