6. IDOLATRY AND THE MIRROR: ICONOCLASM AS A PREREQUISITE FOR INTERHUMAN RELATIONS

Marcel Poorthuis
(University of Tilburg)

Introduction: The other as a Mirror-Image of Myself and the Other as Other

Philosophy lives from experience. Phenomenology teaches us to reflect upon living experience, “zurück zu den Sachen”, rather than to indulge in abstract speculation. That is why I want to start with such an experience, in order to clarify the interhuman relationship. As a father I had several times the opportunity to carry a baby on my arm. In front of the mirror the young child becomes intrigued by what he or she sees in the mirror. However, the fascinating thing is that at first the child is looking at my image in the mirror and then it looks at me in real life and then back to the mirror, as if it is puzzled by the image in the mirror. The child more or less ignores his or her own image. What does the little child think: my father next to me has simultaneously hidden himself in the mirror? Sometimes the child smiles when turning from the reflection in the mirror to her father in real life, noticing the similarity.

From the age of about one year, a child begins to gaze at its own reflection as well, realizing that its own waving and smiling can be seen in the mirror. Before that age, however, the child apparently does not make the connection between its inner experience and its mirror image. Now it is for psychologists to investigate these matters further and to provide a more solid basis by experimenting with many different children of various ages and cultures. What interests me, however, is the underlying evidence that a young child recognizes the other person before it recognizes him or herself. The general assumption that a person first discovers himself and from that basis on starts to explore the world and to relate to other human beings is apparently not self-evident. Although psychological human development does not imply any ontological priority, still it is significant that a child recognizes the face of the other before it recognizes its own face. The founder of the phenomenological method, Edmund Husserl, claims that we understand
other human beings by a double perception. I perceive myself ‘from inside’. I experience the other ‘from outside’. By combining the two, I realize that the other is a human being just like me, an ‘alter ego’ so to speak, a re-edition of myself. Hearing someone crying, I compare that with what I know from my inner experience and deduce that the same sad feeling must have befallen the other person. By this double experience I am able to identify myself with the other.¹

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas doubts whether this double experience constitutes the genuine way to relate to the other. In fact, in this double experience, the other appears as a re-edition of myself.² As a human being, I realize that the other has the same feelings as I have, and I conclude that the other must be a human being like myself. This experience is comparable to the way I see myself in a mirror. I make gestures ‘from the inside’, and I note the effects ‘from the outside’ and identify the two experiences as belonging to one and the same person. But when applying this mirror-experience to the encounter with the other, I myself remain the yardstick and the criterion to measure the other and by recognizing him or her, I reduce him to a ‘double’ of myself. To put it differently, the other is the mirror image of myself and I am able to recognize myself in the other.

But what if the primary experience of the other is not that he is ‘like me’, but that he is ‘otherwise’? What if his appeal to me is not mediated by a double analogy, but is more direct, as if his face ‘speaks’ to me even before words are spoken? Of course the notion of belonging to the same human race should not be denied, constituting as it does the foundation of the equality of all men. The question is, however, whether this constitutes the genuine and original experience of the other. Perhaps by stating the commonality between me and the other,—the other as mirror-image of myself,—I am already suppressing the experience of otherness. Even calling the face of the other a human face, may already constitute a commonality which detracts from the experience of otherness. Or to put it differently: the word ‘human’ does not primarily refer to the experience of commonality between me and all others, but might be an experience I discover in the face of the other before I discover it in reflecting upon myself.

¹ E. Husserl, Cartesiasische Meditationen (Husserliana I) Den Haag, 1950, § 50 calls the other an ‘alter ego’.