Talking about Reflexivity 1

– 'our house', 'our windows on the world' 'getting off auto-pilot', 'taking ownership'

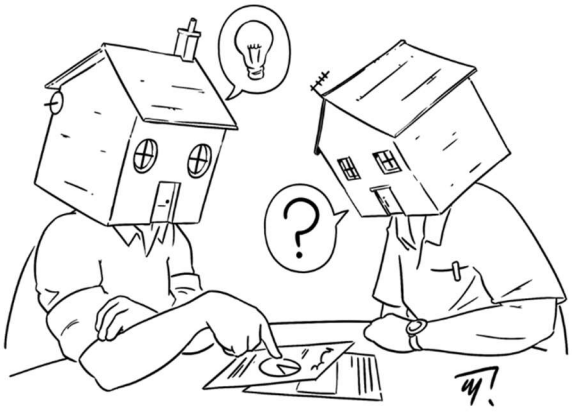
We are all almost identical genetically, and enter the world the same blank canvas. But we are born into, and inhabit, different *'houses'*. We may be all very **similar human animals** – but we all grow into **unique human beings** as a result of our differing history of interaction with the world – as human beings we are 'made from our interaction with others - we are a product of our history of interaction with the world'. It is this interaction that builds the **'house'** that we inhabit.

From the moment we leave the safe confines of the womb we are barraged with inputs. As human beings we are made from these inputs – we enter as human animals, with primitive instincts, and become human beings of powerful habits. We are creatures of mimicry, and our extraordinary powers of memory & experiential learning combine with this faculty to make the habits of others our own.

The inculcation of habits of conduct is at first largely mundane, though often crucial to our survival, but it takes on a more extraordinary role in our development as human beings as we progress. We hear what is being said by others, and slowly grasp what is meant by these utterings, in the language in which it is being said. Their language becomes our language, and their meanings become ours. We are thrown into a house of language & habits that moulds our mindscape with the sayable & the unsayable, and with the acceptable & the unacceptable. We arrive as 'one', and slowly but surely become 'one of them', as we mimic and respond to the expectations of those around us. We are conditioned by others, and their expectations of us – we are 'normed'.

The construction and fitting out of our house gathers a highly focussed intensity when we engage with the institutions of our society – particularly those of education and religion, and often a powerful combination of the two. We are enculturated – some might say indoctrinated – with what is to be believed, and with what is right & wrong, good & bad, useful & useless, and so on. Our habits of mind, mouth and ears are the overt focus of this attention – expectations are made manifest in multiple dimensions and enforced through a variety of mechanisms, and our heads are filled with rules and, of course, what 'they' term knowledge – the learnings and understandings of selected others; particularly those that support 'their' expectations and justify 'their' rules.

We are not normally conscious of what this acquired house of habits enables, nor are we aware of what it disables, or of its constraints upon us – it is just the way things are/ought to be – the walls and fittings of the house are all around us, but we do not see them – we look through them! **We look out on the world through the windows of the house**. Without these windows we would not see the world at all, but **these apertures direct, constrain, mediate, shape, shade and colour our 'views'** – what we see & how we see it.



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Their **habits of attention and interpretation** have become our habits of attention and interpretation.

Their **prejudices & practices** have become our prejudices & practices.

Their way of being in the world has become our way of being in the world.

Our house is one from which we cannot really ever fully escape. It is a house of which we are largely unaware, unless/until we gain the motivation to struggle with the locks and bang on the windows.

Gaining this house-breaking motivation is the first major step to reflexivity. Being simply aware of our house is, in itself, a big leap towards reflexivity – and often a very discomforting one. Most of us, most of the time, simply unquestioningly inhabit our 'house' – going along with the crowd/the 'they' – doing what one should, thinking what one ought – conducting oneself as one should/ought.

We are, one might say, on **autopilot** – it is a highly effective disposition for everyday life – it makes life possible - but it is not the disposition for the life of one that seeks to make a powerful difference in the wicked world. **The foundational first step on the path to reflexivity and practical wisdom is to get off auto-pilot**– just as it is the first step for a pilot entering a thunderstorm, or mountainous terrain!

As primates we have an immense range of reflex actions embedded in our neuro-physiology. When the medic taps that point below your knee with that rubber hammer, s/he is looking for an automatic response. This automatism gives rise to the well-worn, often pejorative phrase, 'knee-jerk reaction'. Reflexivity is all about resisting one's 'knee-jerk' reactions – but not those founded in our neuro-physiology, rather those born of our acquired habits of mind. **Reflexivity is about striving not to leap to assumptions or jump to interpretations – it is about resisting our prejudices - our prejudgements**. This is a pursuit that is, maybe, just as difficult as resisting one's automatic physical response to the neurologist's hammer!

Reflexivity is the foundation of practical wisdom as it is vital that, in making judgements, one is mindful of ones habits of attention and interpretation. The practically wise person is highly aware of what shows up to them as mattering, and how it shows up. **If we are to found our judgements well we must notice what we take notice of, and question what we thence perceive!**

One's nexus of habits of attention and interpretation is built from the prejudgements/prejudices that one has acquired throughout one's lived experience of the world - these prejudgements/prejudices are our windows on the world – they direct our attention and colour our interpretations - they determine what we take account of in our judgements. They are pre-cognitive - they are before thought - they are buried deep in our mindscape – they are the drivers of what 'first comes to mind'. We are normally, and usefully, mindless of them in our everyday lives - they make life possible - but if we wish to be powerful in our judgements, we must shake these prejudicial shackles, so we have the possibility of engaging in the circumstances we face with an attempt at a perspective freed of pre-conceptions.

We do not choose the house into which we are thrown at birth, and throughout most of our lives we are made by the house of prejudices and practices we inhabit. How much we become self-made depends on our reflexivity-seeking house breaking efforts.

Socrates says that the first step to wisdom is to 'know' thyself – but maybe it might be better to say that the first step on the path to wisdom is to 'own' oneself – to take ownership of, and responsibility for, one's prejudices and practices – of one's stances and dances!

To be reflexive is to strive to 'own' oneself.

Peter Lenney [December 2019]

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