

Vilém Flusser

Thought and Reflection

The Brazilian Institute of Philosophy, having invited me to deliver this talk in conclusion of the various courses on philosophy in 1963, has given me the opportunity to state some rather unorthodox views concerning that process we call “thought”. I am grateful for the honor and the opportunity and I propose, as a starting point, the Cartesian distinction between “res cogitans” (the thinking thing) and “res extensae” (the extended things). We may doubt the extended things, but the thinking thing is undoubtable. The relation between these two worlds, i.e. between the doubtful world of matter and the undoubtable world of thought, is rather mysterious and can be established only with “concurus Dei” (the help of God). This Cartesian view of the world, which opposes thought to body and establishes a relation of subject — object between them, and which bases this relation on faith in God, this view is one of the roots, nay the principal root, of Western civilization such as we know it. We can say, in a certain way, that [the] Modern Age, (the age of Western triumph), is no more than the progressive realization of the Cartesian viewpoint. During [the] Modern Age the thinking thing, (“the subject”), attacks the world of bodies, (its “object”), with the mysterious double purpose of understanding and modifying that world. Science is the method by which the thinking thing envelops bodies, in order to understand them. Technology is the method by which the thinking thing clings to bodies in order to modify them. The very success of these two methods, which is the triumph of the West, is also, to my view, the beginning of the end of [the] Modern Age, and therefore, of the West. This very success shows that the knowledge which scientific understanding gives us is as doubtful as the extended things it investigates, and it shows, in consequence, the futility of the modifications which technology operates within that doubtful world. In other words: the epistemological and ethical conquests of Western thought in its advance against the world of matter reveal progressively that something lacks, (possibly “concurus Dei”?), and that something is profoundly wrong with the Cartesian view from which Western thought stems. For instance: Modern physics shows progressively and in many ways that the foundation of matter is thought, since the elements of matter such as positrons, neutrinos etc. are more like symbols of thought than anything else, and since they are fundamental processes in which the distinction of “subject” from “object” can no longer be made. Therefore modern physics reveals the problematicity of the Cartesian distinction “thinking thing — extended thing”, and that something is very wrong with science as a method of knowledge.

Another instance: Technology has modified the world of bodies up to a point where we can imagine a stage of infinite abundance and leisure, but we already know that this will in no way diminish the anxiety and tediousness of human existence: it will very probably intensify them; therefore something is very wrong with technology as pursuit of happiness. Both methods of Western thought have become doubtful and the reason for this must be sought in the concept of “thinking”, such as this concept was outlined by Descartes and progressively realized by the West during [the] Modern Age.

Descartes establishes a dichotomy between matter and thought, body and soul, the doubtful and the undoubtable, and this dichotomy is, to my view, nefarious. But I confess that it is very difficult to overcome. This dichotomy, far from having arisen in the Cartesian system, is already contained within those primeval myths from which Western civilization [has] sprung. Christianity is their ritualized expression. From this point of view Descartes is no more than Christianity explicit. It is Christianity that distinguishes between that which should be saved, (the “soul”), and that which can be given up, (the “body”). The opposition thought: matter is therefore not a consequence of an epistemological distinction, (as it seems to be, if we consider Descartes alone), on the contrary, it is the outcome of a complex whole, which is ethical and religious, and of which we partake. We have been projected by this whole[,] we live in it and thanks to it, and it is therefore enormously difficult to try and imagine some other way of life, some other project, within which the nefarious division between thought and matter were not included. We know that there are other kinds of civilization, for instance the Hindu civilization, which is so far from accepting our division that it conceives of materialized spirit. In fact, our ghosts are Hindu intruders. And we know of so-called “primitive cultures”, which live in pre-logical worlds, i.e. worlds previous to our distinction. But it is impossible for us to experience those projects (which are alien for us) on an existential level. But it is necessary for us to at least try to evade our project, if I am in the least right in claiming that the opposition “thought to matter” threatens our civilization. If I am right in claiming that the very success of science and technology tends to plunge us into the abyss of tedium and futility, we must try it. Up to a certain point I believe we can evade our project. Not, to be sure, by eliminating it, but by making use of our power of reflection. This power can take us to the roots of our origin, namely to where, “in illo tempore”, took place the opposition “thought:matter”, the division between soul and body. Our power of reflection should lead us, therefore, up to that point where, (to quote a myth), we were expelled from Paradise and where our thinking, which is our exile, began.

The power that I just mentioned and that I called reflective, what power is it? In order to throw light upon it, let us return for a moment and consider the process of thinking as I just described it. I said that thought envelops bodies, in order to understand them, and that it clings to

them in order to modify them. Thought is, therefore, the process of grasping which expands into the world of bodies in order to devour them. The methods of this devouring process are science and technology. But there is another direction in which thought can move, namely the opposite direction. In this motion thought turns against itself in order to devour itself, i.e. to understand itself and modify itself. The term “reflection” shows where this kind of thought moves to, namely into the direction opposite to advancing thought. The German term “Nachdenken”, (which means “to think behind or after”) shows how this kind of thought works, namely as a check on thinking. And finally the Czech term “rozmysleni”, (which means “analytical thinking”) shows the result of this kind of thought, namely thought dismembered. Reflection is therefore the inverse motion of thought, wherein thought is being controlled and decomposed into its elements. The method of reflection, which is the devouring of thought by itself, is philosophy. Philosophy is therefore exactly the contrary of science and technology. I had in mind this opposition between philosophy on one side, and science and technology on the other, when I claimed that we should make use of reflection in order to avoid our plunge into the abyss of tedium and futility. It will not be through more science and more technology that we shall be able to escape the anguish of our situation, but through more philosophy, if we do escape it. It is true that in the description of thought I just gave science and technology appear as the progressive tendencies of thought, and philosophy as the regressive tendency. It is further true that, as a heritage of past centuries, progress is still being considered a positive value, in spite of alarming evidence to the contrary. But there are circumstances, recognized as such even by those who put their faith in progress, (unlike me), in which excessive advance requires withdrawals for rest and consolidation. I believe that our circumstances are of such a nature that science and technology have advanced too far, and that my suggestion to substitute emphasis on science and technology [with] emphasis on philosophy can be accepted by those optimists who do not believe in progress as advance toward an abyss. For them, it will be a “*réculer pour mieux sauter*”.

I said that methodical reflection, i.e. philosophy, should lead us towards our origins, unto depths which I suggested with a myth, namely the expulsion from Paradise. This myth tells us in its dense and poetical language, (a characteristic of all myths), a tale which I believe to be about the mystery of the emergence of thought. Be it understood: it tells us about the emergence of Western thought, not of thought “tout court”, (if such a term has any meaning at all). According to the myth we were expelled and cast out because we ate the forbidden fruit of discrimination between good and evil, the fruit of division and doubt. Paradise can be described as the state of non-division and non-doubt. The banishment from Paradise may be described as the state of division and doubt. It is not, therefore, an event of the remote historical past, but it is a mythical event, that is to say it happens to all of us, as it always did. We are being cast out of Paradise

whenever we divide, whenever we doubt. By the way, the term “doubt” has an etymological root in “duo”, which means “two”, and so has the term “divide”. Both therefore imply the loss of one-ness that is the expulsion. In German this becomes even clearer. “To doubt” = “zweifeln” leads to “complete doubt“ = “Verzweiflung”, which means to despair. Our desperate banishment from Paradise is therefore the very act of doubting, which is the act of discriminating, dividing, the act of creating order. We were cast out from Paradise into order and progress. We have left behind, without hope of return, the chaos of indistinction and innocence, and we are being cast mercilessly into the cosmos of distinct clearness, which is death, as the myth says. In fact, this seems to me to be the essence of the myth, in Heidegger’s more modern version: “we are outcasts here and we are for death”. But this act of doubting, which is the act of dividing and ordering, and which the myth calls “our banishment”, is the very act of thinking. In fact, “to doubt” and “to think” are synonymous, and Descartes is, in his totality, a result of this synonymy. The Cartesian thinking thing is undoubtable, because it is the thing that doubts. According to Descartes, doubt cannot doubt itself. Doubt can only doubt the dubious, it can subject it to order, it can discriminate within that order, and thus the dubious will cease to be itself and, become undoubtable. Doubt, that means thought, is therefore an absurd process. It doubts in order to cease to doubt, and as it advances, it transforms the dubious, (that are its objects), into the doubtless, (which is doubt itself). Doubt is therefore doubly absurd: it is absurd, because the aim of thought is self-destruction; and it is absurd because thought tries to reach this absurd aim by transforming everything into doubt. Thought, in its absurdity, is comparable to thirst which tries to quench itself by the waters of the sea. This is absurd, because the sea is inexhaustible, and this is absurd, because the more you drink, the thirstier you become. The further thought progresses, the more evident is its double absurdity, the more evident is our banishment from Paradise.

Two questions impose themselves on our contemplation of the image of thought which I just proposed to you: what is that which thought doubts? and how does thought doubt? In other words: what is doubtful? and to which order is it being submitted by thought? The first question: “what is doubtful?” seems to me to be typically nonsensical, and the problem it poses seems to me to be a typical pseudo-problem. Any answer we might give this question, (for instance the Cartesian answer: “the extended things are doubtful”), would cancel the question, instead of answering it. Any answer to the question would necessarily be a definition of the doubtful, and doubtful defined is no longer doubtful. A definition of the doubtful is absurd, because the doubtful is transformed into thought in any definition, which means that it is transformed into doubt, (which is undoubtable). The definition of the doubtful, though absurd, is the aim of thought; in fact it is the ultimate aim of the process of thought in its entirety. Should thought ever reach that aim, should it ever define the doubtful, this would mean the end of the doubtful, but also the end

of thought, which would have nothing left to doubt, and therefore nothing to think about. In fact, if the doubtful were defined, we would be back in Paradise. The doubtful is therefore not something to be defined, but something to be thought about, in fact, it is the horizon of our thinking. It is no something, but it is the where thought expands to. As thought expands into every direction, (just like the cosmos of astronomy), we must say that the doubtful surrounds thought as a limiting situation. Thought rushes on, and as it advances, it pushes the doubtful farther and farther. The doubtful is not something opposed to thought, (it is no “object” of thought” in the Cartesian sense), but it is the moment in which thought suffers the shock with its ever expanding frontiers. In fact, the doubtful, being no something, is nothing, and this is why it is doubtful. Thought, by doubting it transforms it into something, and this is why thought is a process of realization. In the above argument I believe to have shown the falseness of the Cartesian dichotomy “thinking thing — extended thing”, and this is one of the purposes of this lecture.

The second question: “to which order is the doubtful being submitted by thought?” may now be reformulated thus: “in what order does thought expand?”, and this is an authentic question which admits a clear and meaningful answer. Thought expands in accordance with the rules of language. Thought advances in chains of sentences which are formed in accordance to rules of language, and which follow each other according to the same set of rules. Thought is, in fact, the articulation, (which means the ordering), of the doubtful according to rules of language. We should imagine thought as an expanding web, in which the threads are the rules of language, the knots are the articulations of the doubtful, and the meshes are intrusions of the ineffable. The web is not uniform. Some of its parts are dense, (for instance the one called “physics”), other parts are loose and flabby. In physics the threads of thought, (which are here the rules of the language of mathematics), cover almost entirely the rock of the ineffable, so that there is almost nothing doubtful left, almost nothing left to think about, and thought shows clearly what it is: transformation of the doubtful into language. In other parts of the web of thought the talk that goes on is much looser, and the linguistic character of thought is not as evident. In those parts there is still hope, (hope against hope in my opinion) that thinking and knowledge it produces is something more than a “façon de parler”.

Let us return to the myth of Paradise lost, in an effort to throw some light on the web of thought which is language. Our expulsion from Paradise is an expression, in the sense of “an outcry”. Every word is such an outcry, and with every word we think we are being expelled and cast out. Every word is an articulation of the doubtful, and it is therefore a loss of innocence. The stream of words, (the “conversation”), as it rushes on, drags us along and takes us further and further away from our origins. But conversation, this stream of words, is organized in the web of

language which gives it its structure. Through the meshes in that web we always dwell in the proximity of our origins, even though conversation drags us along, because, as we move on, we take our origins with us. The ineffable hides (so to speak) within the meshes of language, it hides between the words we think, and through these openings we are always in contact with it. Through these openings new words and new thoughts emerge continuously, which means that through these openings we are being continuously cast out of Paradise which we drag along on our path of thinking. The fact that we drag it along is shown by our continued capacity to cry out, to cry out in amazement at the ineffable, thereby creating new words and thoughts. Each outcry, each new word and thought, is a proof that we still dwell in the mysterious proximity of that which is continuously casting us out. It is proof that we think authentically, which means that we are authentic outcasts. But should the web of language close completely around us, should the meshes of language disappear, should discourse become rigorous, (as it does in mathematics), we would lose our capacity for amazement. No new words, no new thoughts would then emerge, and we would revolve in the repetitive circles of idle talk. Physics is approaching this stage of idle talk with great speed, and most of the sentences it utters are already vicious circles reducible to zero. In physics the web of thought has become so dense, that there is no room left for the ineffable to amaze us. There is therefore an air of tedium and inauthenticity about physics, which seems to me to be prophetic.

Thought is a linguistic process which continuously springs from the silence of Paradise, and which continuously seeks a new kind of silence. In fact, thought is the expulsion from Paradise in search of Paradise, though of a Paradise of the second order. Physics shows even now the character of the Paradise of the second order: inauthenticity and boredom. The sum total of knowledge which thought supplies is, if rigorously articulated, reducible to zero. The perfect technological civilization which will result from this knowledge, and which will establish the Paradise of the second order, shows even now, (long before it is established), what it will be like: like hell. That perfect technological civilization will mean, in fact, the end of doubt, the end of thought, because it will mean perfect planning reducible to zero. Thought shows here its most absurd aspect: it is exuberant, adventurous and inspiring, as long as it is imperfect, (or “wrong”, because not reducible to zero). But perfect thought, thought successful, thought triumphant, is absolute boredom, mortal tediousness, disgusting *idem per idem*. Western civilization is approaching perfect thought, because it succeeded in reducing conversation to two very simple and very dense levels: science and technology. On these two levels thought is becoming perfect and totally successful. On these levels our thoughts can be reduced to mathematical and formally logical structures, which in turn can be reduced to zero. Western civilization will establish a perfect society on these two levels, and thus bring about Paradise of the second order. The Paradise of idle talk, of

boredom, where nothing amazing can happen and nothing can therefore be doubted.

I believe that the danger of that sort of Paradise is real, and that we underestimate it, because we still hope for it, although we know, by now, how it will work. Yet, I believe, it can be avoided. I can be avoided if new levels of conversation are opened, levels on which language is not as rigorous and dense as it is in science. To be sure, art and religion are such levels, and they maintain contact with the ineffable and a capacity for amazement. But they are being invaded, pitilessly, by scientific elements, and can no longer deflect the direction of progress. Only methodic reflection can do that, because only methodic reflection is a critique of science. I said that thought is not only a process of expansion, but also one of contraction. It tries not only to know what it is not, but also what it is. It doubts not only of the doubtful, but it doubts itself. This aspect of thought reveals, to my view, a further mistake in the Cartesian system. Thought can doubt itself. This motion of thought, this reflux, this doubt about doubt, is, I believe, the definition of philosophy. Thought is, as I said, a linguistic process. Philosophy may be therefore defined as language talking about itself, as a reflection on language. In fact, though without confessing it, philosophy always knew this about itself, and this was the role it played in the history of conversation. For instance: it reflected upon the utterances of religious conversation, and thus made room for a new kind of conversation to spring from the ineffable, namely science. It now reflects upon the utterances of the scientific conversation. It may thus give rise to a new form of conversation, full of amazement, full of adventure, a conversation about something as yet completely [u]nimaginable. Thus philosophy, as methodic criticism of present conversation, may avoid the plunge of Western civilization into the abyss of the inauthentic silence. Thought is an absurd process. We think, in order to think no more, we talk, in order to stop talking. Thought is absurd, but it is what makes us what we are, thinking things, humans. To be human is to be absurd. To be human is to be expelled from the innocence of Paradise, to be expelled from integration. To be human is to be an outcast, a being in banishment, in short: a thinking absurd being. Let us accept this absurdity, let us think as much as possible, let us doubt on as many [levels] as possible. Rilke says that the foundation of our existence has expelled us, risking us. Let us accept that risk. Let us refuse to be made prisoners of the tired and boring conversation now under way in the Western civilization, that tedious conversation called “progress”. Let us not be afraid of new words and new thoughts. Let us open new openings and experience new amazements. Thus, and only thus shall we be [human], namely “thinking things” (*res cogitantes*).