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The Living Mirror and Learned Ignorance

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The Living Mirror and Learned Ignorance (Vivum Speculum et Docta Ignorantia)

Abstract

This article is devoted to an analysis of two essential concepts in Vladimir Bibikhin’s philosophy, the “living mirror” and “learned ignorance.” These concepts are presented in all of his major works, and have vital ontological, anthropological and epistemological importance in his oeuvre.

Keywords

Bibikhin, human being, learned ignorance, living mirror, nature, philosophy, poetry, word

In early 1998 I was asked by the Petersburg publisher Nauka to write a review of Vladimir Bibikhin's book *Recognize Yourself*, the manuscript of which was at that time being prepared for publication. Among the many themes that thrust themselves upon the reader in that work, one of the author's thoughts left a particular mark due to its enigmatic and somehow elusive quality. I have in mind Bibikhin's discourse on the idea of the "living mirror." What does this strange combination of words, familiar to us from the plots of fairy tales and myths, but practically absent from scholarly and philosophical discourse, have to tell us? I will attempt to grapple with this old difficulty of mine, and start by re-reading the places in Bibikhin's texts where this idea is expounded in different ways.

At the very beginning of the book *Recognize Yourself*, as he places the task of self-knowledge in question, the author states the ambiguity and danger inherent in the task. Man "is already fatally tired of himself, who he has seen everywhere, always one and the same and tiresome, in the mirror..." (Bibikhin 1998: 8). But self-knowledge implies addressing oneself, and that is not possible without some kind of reflecting screen, real or imagined, to present the self. Why does the self-consciousness provided by mirrors elicit the feeling of being "fatally tired," and is that the only feeling elicited? Perhaps for some it could, on the contrary, generate a flow of life energy, as in the case of the poet Viacheslav Ivanov, whose self attains new being as it finds itself reflected in the Self of God. This is unclear. Probably what he is getting at is some particular experience of an encounter with a mirror which drains life or gives life. But Bibikhin holds back: "We now can find nothing inside ourselves or around us which resembles such an experience" (Bibikhin 1998: 37).

Vestigial rays of that experience can still be found in the traces it left in the old traditions of myths, poetry, literature, and philosophy. Is there any chance for its renewal? In fact, so-called identification ($I = I$), as today's psychologists and anthropologists define it, constitutes a recognition of one's reflection in the mirror as oneself. The person looking in the mirror in an act of personal authentication says: "That's me." But the concept of identification is one of the most widely applied in contemporary discourse. Was it always understood this way?

Bibikhin, in reference to Plutarch, relates the ancient challenge of God to man, "Know thyself," inscribed at the entrance to the temple, to another inscription containing the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet, E ([esi]), aligning it with the ancient Sanskrit phrase *tad tvam* (That art thou). Man finds himself at the focal point of the two imperatives: [know thyself > < that art thou]. All that is visible in the temple to the seeker intrigued by the challenge "Know thyself" is addressed to him: "That art thou." The two challenges are strangely opposed to one another, almost mirror images of each other. The person set on knowing himself, it appears, is drawn by a centripetal force inward, and would appear to have almost reached his own center, but unexpectedly finds himself cast out-

ward by centrifugal force on the periphery of what surrounds him—that art thou. A truly strange experience.

Bibikhin writes:

God frustrates the hopes of the private individual [...] *That art thou* confounds the individual's calculations and effaces the border behind which the person wanted to isolate himself. The person came to God for support and the latter offers a corrective: *That art thou*. *That* here is anyone, anyone at all, above all God himself, to whom the person thinks he has come, and here he finds a projection, in which he should above all recognize himself. Then, any person and any thing which is not other, which is not wholly other, *that art thou*. Another person is not further from you than are you yourself, and no thing can be further. It's unexpected (Bibikhin 1998: 48–49).

What is unexpected here is that the person thought to attain self-knowledge by means of his will, strength, and reason, but at the same time failed to notice that he was driven by two diametrically opposite impersonal forces, mirror images of each other. The subject in action here turns out not to be the individual, but the relationship “That art thou” itself. Bibikhin identifies it with understanding, treating the latter not in the strict epistemological sense as the subjective method of knowledge but, following Heidegger and Gadamer, ontologically, as man's way of being. Man, reaching the limit of self-recognition, asks himself: Do I exist? Is that me? Receiving in answer (from where?): No, that is not me, that is you. In such an experience, do existence and non-existence change places at a speed beyond the threshold of human perception?

This relationship, the understanding into which a reasoning man enters, instead of strengthening his mental functions, leads him into “misunderstanding” (here is a paradox!); it abolishes the “private self, who now is no more one's own than *you* or than any *that*. Who then bears the message *That art thou*? The message itself. “The relationship is primary. The structure of simple understanding is self-maintained.” (Bibikhin 1998: 49).

So we find that this relationship is self-operative, self-organizing, and self-developing. Absolute relativism? A person falls into it like a grain between two millstones. It works automatically (automatic being the Greek translation of “self-operating”). In Bibikhin's book *The Wood(s)* (Bibikhin 2011) he distinguishes between two types of automatons: artificial, non-living ones and natural, living ones. Anything living is, as such, a kind of automaton, in the sense of the word that we have just noted.

At the same time, a living automaton with understanding brings its self-operating into being in diametrical opposition to (or, again, as a mirror image of) its two sides. This, in fact, is where we see the inherent strangeness of such an entity. Understanding simultaneously contains

both the property of mirroring and the property of being alive. Shall we take a guess and consider whether this is where that persistent phrase “living mirror” comes from?

We must test this guess, taking others’ experiences into account. Bibikhin discovers attempts to describe similar thoughts, in part, in Schopenhauer. A student of Kant, who asserted the unknowability of the “thing-in-itself,” he agrees on this fundamental unknowability, but also points out an exception. As Bibikhin notes: “Schopenhauer declares that there is a strange experience, a festivity, not described by anyone before me, in which this ‘in itself’ opens up; then I simultaneously open up to myself and am revealed, myself, not to be *me*” (Bibikhin 1998: 70). This thought of the author of *The World as Will and Representation* is interpreted by Bibikhin thus: “Whoever ‘suddenly’ sees things as they are ‘in themselves’ becomes a ‘bearer’ of the world. The world is not necessarily many things, there is a direct route to it from one thing as well” (Bibikhin 1998: 69). A similar idea can be found in Leibniz, according to whom the thing as monad is a “living mirror” of the Universe, the monad of monads (Leibniz 1982).

It looks as though the Kantian unknowability of the “thing-in-itself” has been overcome in the “festive” experience of the Self filling the entire screen of the mirror presented by the world. Has plenitude of being thus been achieved? Certainly, but that is only one side of the matter. The second, which is on the other side of the mirror, but without which the mirror itself does not exist, bears witness to something else. Bibikhin continues quoting from *The World As Will and Representation*:

...man, who recognizes himself in all beings, his most intimate and genuine selfhood, should also see the endless sufferings of all living things as his own and thus take upon himself the pain of the whole world. To him no suffering can be alien [...] Now he recognizes the whole, perceives its essence and finds that everything is encompassed by unstoppable destruction, senseless movement, and inner contradiction; he sees, wherever he looks, suffering humanity and the suffering animal kingdom and the world disappearing he knows not where. And all of this now affects and afflicts him as a selfish man is affected and afflicted only by his own personality (Bibikhin 1998: 84–85).

So what, finally, do we see in this strange mirroring relationship of “That art thou,” existence or non-existence, the holiday of abundance or the funeral feast for the disappeared world? For Schopenhauer, compassion is not only an ethical but, above all, an ontological category. Is life anything other than sharing the joys and sufferings of all living things in a mimetic relationship of mutual mirroring?

After these posing these questions to Schopenhauer, Bibikhin’s investigation moves deep inside history, and finds another source for the

problem we face. This is the philosophy of Leibniz, where this strange phrase “living mirror” is directly used with a specific meaning and raised to the level of a theological, cosmological, and anthropological category. Here, Bibikhin cites Leibniz’s definition from paragraph 56 of *Monadology*: a monad is a “perpetual living mirror of the universe.” His commentary on this idea is the following: “The living mirror is not a haphazard image here, Leibniz is using a term from Nicholas of Cusa” (Bibikhin 1998: 120). But is it the same term, or a freely applied metaphor, used by Leibniz as the basis of his ontology, and by Nicholas of Cusa as the basis of theology?

The first precedent, so to speak, for the concept of the “living mirror” in the history of philosophy was laid down by none other than Nicholas of Cusa. I will take the liberty of re-translating the important quotations cited by Bibikhin. This secondary quotation will permit us to see how Bibikhin, through his commentary, embeds himself in the system of mutually reflecting living mirrors of philosophical thought.

I need to [...] leap across the wall of invisible vision, on the other side of which I will be able to find you, Lord. But this wall is both everything and nothing: you, who appear as both everything and nothing at all, live inside this high wall. No mind can by its own strength complete a leap across it. Sometimes it seems to me that you see everything in yourself, like a living mirror... (*De visione Dei* 12, 48).

The mind “uncovers everything within itself as in a mirror living by means of intellectual life” (*De venatione sapientiae* 17, 50). The mirror of truth is God, all other creatures are various more or less straight or crooked mirrors and “intellectual natures will, among them, be more alive, brighter and straighter mirrors” (*De filiatione Dei*) (Bibikhin 1998: 120–121). From the words of Nicholas of Cusa it is clear that this astonishing mirror is not only living, but also intelligent, and therefore capable of knowledge.

In the first quotation cited above, the reader’s attention is drawn to the fact that Nicholas of Cusa misspeaks, in a sense, regarding the epistemological condition for approaching the concept of the “living mirror.” It is necessary to make a transcensus, a leap across the “wall of invisible vision,” which is “both everything and nothing.” Furthermore, God Himself lives in this wall, according to Nicholas’s extraordinary intuition. And if the wall is a mirror, then the impossible task consists of entering it. Here another essential concept of his philosophy is implied, namely that of “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*), in which the fundamental ontological difference between being and nonbeing is defined. The necessary connection between the “living mirror” and “learned ignorance” will be further discussed in what follows. In Nicholas’s terms, the upshot is that God can be known as a living mirror only through not knowing how such knowledge can be attained.

In his book *The Language of Philosophy* Bibikhin previously undertook an attempt at the ontological interpretation of these ideas.

In Nicholas of Cusa's work, the relationship between the image in man and the divine pre-image is not one of likeness, but of identity. Sameness does not occur among things in existence. No two things duplicate each other. Identity can exist only where it can exist: in being identical to itself; in truth; in alikeness. The reflection reconstructs *the same* in the pre-image: not resembling and not distinct from itself, but its truth; it sees itself as another in the sense of its true nature, as it does not know itself in itself and could never recognize without looking at the other, in which it recognizes its thinking self. In this recognition the divine element is present as that without which there would be no recognition. Looking at God, man recognizes himself as such and recognizes God as that which recognizes itself (Bibikhin 2007: 230).

People expend enormous amounts of energy in order to truly know as much as possible, including the knowledge of God, not suspecting that an equal effort is required in order to not know correctly. The right hand does not know what the left hand is doing? If one is permitted to speak of a "living mirror," can one also talk of a "sick mirror" or a "dead" one?

Bibikhin finds historical testimony regarding the real (let us hope) experience of the living mirror in the past (I almost put the phrase in quotation marks, but decided to leave them out), warning that now such an experience no longer reveals itself, and the old experience has somehow been forgotten. Why did that happen? Was it due to historical devaluation, human profanation, or because of increased entropy? The answer is unclear.

For Bibikhin, the theme of the mirror is related to and passes imperceptibly into the theme, no less enigmatic for him, of the double, or twin. The negative experience of doubling, developing into nightmarish visions, became magnified and expanded in proportion to the quantitative increase in the industrial production of artificial mirrors. This experience was noted and described, not by medieval theologians and modern metaphysicists, but by writers. Bibikhin looks to the studies of doubles in Gogol and Dostoevsky. Major Kovalev in Gogol's *The Nose* and Golyadkin in Dostoevsky's *The Double* enter into nightmarish, phantasmagorical waking dream-states which begin with the sight of their reflections in the mirror. They are unaware of the saying that warns, "the shortest way to hell is through the mirror."

If for the optimist Leibniz, man is also a monad, from which it follows that he is a living mirror of the Universe and God, for many nineteenth and twentieth-century writers, and for philosophers reflecting on their visions, the human reflection heralds the automated corpse. Bibikhin comments on this new situation:

Man controls himself with a mirror, he wants to be the person he should be. But with a person things happen *all of a sudden*, of their own accord [...] The slightly anxious major asks for the mirror in order to check for a pimple, but it turns out that there is no nose on his face. This is that *other*, which taps at man from the inside during the night and which man brushes off himself, it appears right on his face in the form of this screaming absence on that face. The nose, practically the same thing as the person himself, disappears (Bibikhin 1998: 129).

A shocking event has taken place: the man wanted to find out what he was, turning to the mirror, and there it turns out that he is absent (as in Maupassant's short story *La Horla*). Perhaps in the era of the rise of nihilism, proclaimed by Nietzsche (in no small part inspired by his reading of Dostoevsky), the magic mirror ceased to show being and in its place the abyss of nothingness stretched open?

In the Russian language, the noun for mirror, *zerkalo*, derives from the verb *zret'*, meaning "to see," as is the case with the Latin word *speculum* and the Greek *katoptron*. The effect of mirroring arises in certain specific instances of sight. More precisely, mirroring as such is the result of a specific intensification or concentration of seeing, and next this idea can be ingeniously incorporated in the concrete object that we call a mirror. The noun's nominalization is generated by the self-action expressed in the verb "to see." The first experience of encounter with the mirror (before the invention and production of artificial mirrors) takes place in the vision of one's reflection in the pupil of another living being who sees you, as Socrates in his time pointed out: "Then the eye, looking at another eye, and at that in the eye which is most perfect, and which is the instrument of vision, will there see itself?" (Plato 1892). Light is another necessary condition for such an event.

Bibikhin conducts a *razbor* (an analysis or dissection) of this type of vision using the material of Leibniz's *Monadology*. The monad, by definition, has no windows, or eyes, and yet nonetheless is capable of seeing. How? Bibikhin clarifies thus:

It does not need windows, because it knows, so to speak, not only in its own body but in its whole self that it will come into being in the exact measure in which it is pulled toward the whole. It is a living mirror, that is a selective eye, that sees at first the whole and then, in the *interests* of the whole (for the monad all the interest, inter-esse between its being and nonbeing is concentrated in the world) and in the perspective of the whole it already sees what the whole sees. Whose eye is the monad's? Again, it belongs to the *whole* [...] Through all monads the whole of the world looks at itself and sees first and foremost itself once more. Behind the world stands God. God looks at the world through the eyes of all the monads... (Bibikhin 1998: 144).

Is the existence of the living mirror temporal? No, not according to Leibniz. Does that mean that it (if it is “it” and not he or she) lives eternally? Bibikhin asks himself the following question: “How do we understand this, that a monad, a living mirror, a simulation of the divine countenance, did not come into being and will not be destroyed?” (Bibikhin 2009b: 475).

The theologian Nicholas of Cusa reasoned on the living mirror cautiously and apophatically, from the point of view of learned ignorance. The metaphysician Leibniz, the creator of a philosophical doctrine of optimism (it is possible, though it has not been proven, that optimism and optics have the same root), uses the concept of the living mirror with greater boldness, going so far as to attempt to reconstruct its mechanism in his thesis that this world is the best of all possible worlds. Unlike Leibniz, Schopenhauer saw a pessimistic landscape in the world’s mirror. Gogol, Dostoyevsky and others described the nightmarish experience of the subject suffering from mirror vision. And Nietzsche’s view froze into place the dead God. Had the mirror died, having disintegrated into man-made mass-produced artificial shards?

Such is the historical panorama of viewpoints on the problem under consideration, which Bibikhin presents in the first part of his book *Recognize yourself*. In the next part, he attempts to summarize the available approaches, to interpret them and to draw certain ontological and anthropological deductions from them.

In the second part of his book, Bibikhin indicates three common mistakes of the mind in the process of self-knowledge. The first is “obtuse pride,” the second “cunning unscrupulousness,” and the third is the most refined one and the most difficult to expose. If I have understood correctly, it consists of the mind reaching the speculative (mirror) state and convincing itself it has attained truth. The mirror of the human mind presents possibilities for the endless play of its own reflections. In Bibikhin’s words:

The magic mirror plays and talks with the person, showing him life and other striking visions whose variety and riches lead him to believe that it is not magic and not a deception. Then, the person, pushing away those nearest to him, draws closer toward these reflections with abandon, expecting that their enchantment will be sufficient to enable him safe passage through the whole journey of life [...] The magical surface of the mirror reflects how attached people become in their devotion to it, and what hopes they base on its consolation (Bibikhin 1998: 233–234).

The living mirror of God has been imperceptibly transformed into a magic mirror in the hands of a self-sufficient person, confident in his powers. It is Bibikhin’s conviction that this is the most dangerous error the human mind can make, one which needs to be overcome. But how? Break the mirror, or refrain from looking in it? A crude approach will not work with this delicate mechanism. Bibikhin writes:

A shattered mirror, it seems, drops into the void. Who has the power to turn his back on it? Not a weak, wayward person, to whom reassurance is so important, who feels such a need for support, that he is glad to be deceived for the sake of maintaining the illusion of being in control. This is the error of the self-styled gnostics, people who keep secrets with God in their heart of hearts (Bibikhin 1998: 234).

Gnostics claim to know their calling, as is implied by their self-designation. Their mirror is magical, it possesses automatism, that is, it is self-operational, but is it a living automaton? To shatter such a mirror means to fall into the void, into powerlessness, helplessness, the condition called *amechania*, which, as Bibikhin writes elsewhere, a person should learn to endure.

Bibikhin describes the symptoms in detail and offers an inauspicious diagnosis.

The indubitably increasing obviousness of the truths that the magic mirror reveals casts a spell over the reasoning faculty, unfolds before it easy access to immutable truths, but simultaneously encloses it in solitude, which external speech only deepens (Bibikhin 1998: 235).

The essence of this type of mental mistake consists in the fact that though the person may in fact gain knowledge of the truth, but only half of the truth, in the sense that the other half is untrue, a deficit which is worse because it goes unnoticed. In this state, Bibikhin says, “the person comes to know, but is not known” (Bibikhin 1998: 237). The other side of his knowledge is his lack of knowledge. But the connection between them is absent. “There is no unity” (Bibikhin 1998: 237). Here again, as proof against the opposite claim, we encounter the strange affinity between the living mirror and learned ignorance. Perhaps the mirror serves not as a means or instrument of knowledge, on the contrary, as a way of teaching a person ignorance? As a witty person once said, a mirror is a hole in reality.

In the philosophical tradition the image in the mirror is called a reflection, the same term used for the main activity of the reasoning faculty. The higher mode of reflection—the reflection of reflections—is defined as speculation (literally: “mirroring”), treated by Hegel as the limit state of the dialectical method. The metaphor of the mirror is immanently present in the content of the category of knowledge, though attempts have been made to dispute this. The problem lies in determining whether a person is doomed to this mirror or can be freed from it. In this world, according to the Apostle Paul, human vision is conditioned by the filter of a mirror: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). From all appearances, there is no getting round the use of a mirror. But are we justified in distinguishing the living mirror of Nicholas of Cusa from the magic mirror of the gnostics? Bibikhin writes in connection with this:

It is only in the brilliance (the reflection) of perfect (round) knowledge that we can see anything at all. Only in its authenticity do we place our faith. But this brilliance always seems to us remote, difficult, strange. It is one thing and we are another. We are alone, because it is eternal, and we here and now are caught up in the ephemeral, what is required, necessary, binding (Bibikhin 1998: 243–244).

The fragment that follows, is Bibikhin's definitive statement on the problem, expressing his ultimate position towards it. The main issue is not the orientation of subjective vision and the establishment of an objective reflecting screen, but in that singular entity that allows them to come to fruition. The one foundation that gives life to the mirror is light. Bibikhin warns: "we ought to wish with all our might not to see God, but to be seen by Him. To be, not a seeker of light who hides, but to ask that all the light shine on oneself" (Bibikhin 1998: 256). The conversation moves to Sophia—"as Nicholas of Cusa says, God's living wisdom itself, accessible to us in that small measure in which we can see anything at all..." (Bibikhin 1998: 256). The transformation from the spellbinding mirror of the gnostics to the living mirror is precisely a conversion.

Conversion does not take place once and for all, it is ongoing: it is an unending turning away from the image toward that which forms it. Light, capturing us from all sides then and leaving not a single outpost of darkness where we, like predatory beasts, could catch our prey—bears witness to having seen us. The circle of knowledge is traversed in seeing the fact that we are visible, and this perfect knowledge (perfect because we see everything that it would be possible to see here) becomes the light for faith (Bibikhin 1998: 256–257).

So light is the living mirror?

Can we replace the word "mirror" with a different one, or choose a synonym for it? Perhaps, in speaking of the mirror, we have in mind something else, something hidden. Is the living mirror not only a metaphor but also a euphemism? What is called a living mirror is an active agent of knowledge, capable of knowing or not knowing its knowledge or ignorance. What is the meaning of this riddle? It concerns the soul.

Bibikhin writes,

the soul does not know, does not want and does not accept anything, she feels awkward and frightened everywhere, monstrous and incomprehensible—is that so? That means she is looking the wrong way, she has looked to the left side rather than to the right [...] (Bibikhin 1998: 337).

What the soul is has always been a mystery. As Heraclitus said: "You will not find the boundary of the soul, no matter what path you take, so

deep is its measure.” Bibikhin, too, stands perplexed before this mystery of the soul:

This is why, in what has remained an enigma for me up to now, the soul does not look inside anything, does not study or investigate anything, simply opens herself up, as soon as she finds an opportunity to do so, and shrivels up in anguish when the darkness oppresses her. An astonishing mode of activity (Bibikhin 1998: 337).

We see that the function of knowledge is attributed to the soul by an error, or rather, she is capable of knowing without exerting effort. “Opening herself up, she begins to sound and shine, inscrutably, without knowledge, *divining* what things are standing before her, and even remote things, the past, and even the future” (Bibikhin 1998: 337).

It appears that the soul both is and is not a mirror. To put it more precisely, we are accustomed to considering the basic property of a mirror to be its ability to reflect light, but the soul can let light through, it is translucent. If it is a mirror, it combines the mutually exclusive capabilities of reflecting and transmitting. Bibikhin articulates his intuition about this:

Everything suddenly is reflected in her [the soul]—not as in a mirror, firstly, because she herself changes and reconstructs herself under the influence of whatever she has touched, and secondly, because it is reflected not in its own, often dark and hideous aspect, but unexpectedly, in a changed and transfigured, illuminated and beautified form (Bibikhin 1998: 337).

It is truly an astonishing mode of activity, simultaneously reflecting and transmitting, adapting itself to the original and simultaneously refiguring it with her reflection. But this, after all, is a principle of life. The soul is a living mirror of what is nearest and farthest away from it—the body.

Bibikhin’s crowning insight on the soul is this:

The soul with its dark and light, diurnal and nocturnal sides does not need constant external actuation: one push is enough to start an endless series of resonances and echoes going inside her. And even without any push, her living mirrors reflect one another (Bibikhin 1998: 393).

Her function is not consciousness; that is the prerogative of the mind. Bibikhin was a harsh critic of ambition and the bluff of consciousness, postulating that consciousness dislodges and usurps the position of another, primary capability of the soul, namely conscience. Consciousness and conscience—the words resemble each other, but there is a difference between them. Bibikhin defines conscience thus: “an authority which leads and keeps different modes of a person informed about each

other, forcing these different modes in a person to integrate with each other” (Bibikhin 1998: 488).

In the review for *Nauka*, we performed a detailed and thorough textological analysis of the book *Recognize Yourself* in terms of this problem, with abundant quotations (surely not to the editors’ liking). I attempted to express the current level of my understanding of the essence of the matter by moderately adequate blocks of linking commentary between quotations. Still, the enigma remained an enigma. That first attempt to read *Recognize yourself* (in unpublished manuscript form) was fifteen years ago. Has anything changed in the intervening period?

As fate would have it, in early 1998, March 30th to be exact, before *Recognize yourself* had yet been released, Bibikhin came to St. Petersburg and gave a lecture at the philosophy faculty of St. Petersburg State University on the subject “Living Thing and Automaton,” which was part of the course on “The Wood(s)” he was teaching at that time to the students of the Department of Philosophy at Moscow State University, and which was subsequently published posthumously as the book of that name (2011). I was present at that lecture and took part in the unofficial discussion afterward at the Chair of Ontology and Theory of Knowledge. Having waited my turn, I tried to ask Vladimir Veniaminovich some questions that had occurred to me earlier in connection with the manuscript, to do with the enigma of the living mirror.

My understanding at that time was even murkier than it is now, although some conjectural ideas had arisen which I wanted to share with the author. My questions were: what is a living mirror? Are there some other sources on this theme? Is it possible to advance any further in resolving this problem? At the same time, I made a halting attempt to expound my own hypothesis on the “setup” of the living mirror, using as my interpretative key the idea of the “nonnon” (*nyetka*), a mirror-like toy described by Vladimir Nabokov in his novel *Invitation to a Beheading*. Vladimir Veniaminovich Bibikhin patiently listened to my questions and unformed hypothesis, answering concisely: “I do not know what a living mirror is.” How could this be so? Here I had been hoping to hear from the man himself the premises through which he defined the problem, but received a negative answer. Though it was undoubtedly fair: the question deserved such an answer. What else could I have expected? As the proverb declares, one fool can ask so many questions that even a hundred wise men will not be able to answer them. Yet all the same, his reaction took me by surprise; this was the author of the text in which the expression was used many times over, and his answer sounded like a withdrawal from the conversation. The author had cited quotations from classic authors on the living mirror, but in answer to a reader’s question as to what such a thing is, he answered: “I do not know.” I had the tact to walk away in silence and nod goodbye. And with this short episode, my interaction with Vladimir Veniaminovich came to an end.

I am not going to spend any more time dwelling on the nuances of my own reflections. Later, I understood that a negative answer is an answer in its own right. Thus, for example, a child, having been given an interesting toy, tries unconcernedly to pull it apart so as to see how it functions on the inside, and is surprised by the adult's injunction against doing so. Sometimes it is helpful to be given a lesson in ignorance. The main thing is that the problem had captured my attention and remained in expectation of clarification. I read each new Bibikhin book as a new opportunity, searching out and paying close attention to the places where the expression "living mirror" emerged. Over the course of fifteen years, this has provided quite enough food for thought. I will make one more attempt to come to terms with this enigma, looking at some other works of Bibikhin's.

One of his densest works, in which our theme is illuminated along new lines, is *The Grammar of Poetry* (2009). Here the living mirror no longer casts off its reflection on the problem of self-knowledge, but on the problem of language and the word. Let us try to trace its development.

In referring to the grammar of poetry, Bibikhin has in mind, properly speaking, philosophy itself. Poetry is primary, and philosophy is its immanent reflection. In Bibikhin's opinion, the first historical experiment that created the model of poetic creation is, the Vedic hymns. Poetry and philosophy have to do with the word, which brings light. The corpus of the Rig Veda is formed by an aggregate of such words. Its foundation, out of which other poetic forms grew, lies in these hymns. Bibikhin reveals the essential specificity of the hymn genre in the fact that it contains a certain mirroring quality. He writes:

When the hymn addresses itself toward itself and becomes its own meaning, it, broadly and tentatively speaking, splits in two, into hymn and Hymn—here are these words as they are, and here are these words as Exalted Speech, a sacrificial thing. Glorification as a gift to the gods. Celebration in song generally. One and the same word performs two functions. It is metaphor without metaphor or before metaphor [...] The semantics of this poetry can be called a tautology, in the good sense, meaning that formally speaking, it cannot be explicated, if it has not already explicated itself at once by itself, through its own brilliance (Bibikhin 2009: 18–19).

Knowledge received without explanation and proof is learned ignorance.

The hymns of the Rig Veda were, at the same time, the first form of prayer. Mirroring effects are notably present in these hymns and, as Bibikhin writes, there takes place a

constant change of aspect, a transference of the gaze, directed now at the god being invoked, now at the one invoking and singing, a return, a

turn to the self [...] The formulas addressed to the invoked ('Come') and to oneself ('I call') turn out to be equally matched [...]. The game of reflections continues (Bibikhin 2009a: 22–23).

The hymn could be called a kind of stereoacoustic, mirroring form of song. "These two sides, the singing self and that divine being that picks up my song, merge" (Bibikhin 2009a: 27).

This mirroring duplication in the hymn again leads Bibikhin to the identical phenomenon of doubles. "Doubling. The thought suggests itself, that it may be understood in connection with the theme of the double, the twin" (Bibikhin 2009a: 31). As the hymn develops, man and god become doubles of each other. "We have already talked about the mirroring of the god and the song [...] about the mirroring of human and divine singers" (Bibikhin 2009a: 42). As he reads the Rig Veda, Bibikhin takes a kind of joy in revealing, time and time again, instances of mirroring and twinning. "It is honey to my ears, and my song goes on, but as in a mirror the divine hierophant Varuna also drinks it. Twinhood is reestablished. [...] again mirroring, beautiful mutuality" (Bibikhin 2009a: 53–54).

A vision that arises in singing and listening to hymns, Bibikhin observes, is "gazing as if spellbound [watching], as if drawing one's eyes near and dissolving in the object [...]" (Bibikhin 2009a: 58). This is a gaze into the mirror, but a particular gaze into a particular mirror. In this event there is not stasis, but dynamism, vertiginous and self-generated in nature. Bibikhin emphasizes: "Mirroring, responsiveness reaches the point that the singers and the Maruta storm-deities change places" (Bibikhin 2009a: 62).

Self-propulsion is recognized as the basic principle of life. The creator of life is the god Indra, to whom a sacrifice is made in the form of a hymn. "He is constant self-propelling tension, eternal inner incandescence, sharpness which cannot be dulled. He can be understood as the beginning of all action, events, history" (Bibikhin 2009a: 74). Long before Nicholas of Cusa and Leibniz, without explicitly using the phrase "living mirror," the Vedic hymn names Indra just that. "The mirroring and responsiveness are strict in this verse, you see: the radiance of Indra is answered by the ascent towards him of the *beautiful one*, who is *also like the dawn*. Usually it is understood as the song that greets him" (Bibikhin 2009a: 127). Bibikhin admits: "By the way, this mirroring is among the most captivating features of the Rig Veda" (Bibikhin 2009a: 127).

The effect of a living mirror in the hymn is not a chance circumstantial occurrence or unique to a particular fragment. Its agency spreads instantaneously like a fractal interpenetration to fill the whole scope of the work, as life breathes identically in each cell of an organism. Bibikhin writes:

This emergence of two equals as in a mirror, this resonance, this response, penetrates into the field of vision with such distinctness that it

immediately echoes in different layers of the poem [...] Poetry is a form of ontology, and in it, “through mirroring, *all* being is restored (Bibikhin 2009a: 128, 131).

The dynamic of poetic ontological vision is the following:

Two gazes, that of the garden (the world) and mine, meet. Gaze sees gaze—may we put it thus? That must mean both *what* it will see and *how* it sees. It will then be drawn into the whirlpool, into which it will disappear, and hold fast; as in the endless turning of the world’s sphere, each point on it resists leaving its position. The gaze disappears, ceasing to separate itself from the gaze of the beloved. I and you are such that you are I (Bibikhin 2009a: 276).

Bibikhin proposes his definition of the hymn from the perspective of ontology of the event:

The hymn is a breakthrough act, an extreme ascent, a triumphant moment in history, with confidence in the breakthrough nature of this event. The transformation-expansion is greeted with joy, of a harsh kind; the singer goes inside himself as he perhaps has never known himself, and he recognizes this new self as the real one (Bibikhin 2009a: 139).

Let us consider another declaration of Bibikhin’s. He is continually finding in the Rig Veda “mirroring, properly enigmatic, it casts a spell on me and I cannot bring myself to look all the way into it” (Bibikhin 2009a: 163). The gaze is oriented toward that mirror effect and situated in a constant search, but successful encounters with it elicit only surprise and bewilderment. It is known and not known at the same time. For this reason, sometimes when he reaches such points, for example, “the double’s observant non-participation in himself” or “the Heraclitean identity of mortals and immortals,” Bibikhin confesses that he is “at a loss to make an analysis (*razbor*) at the moment” (Bibikhin 2009a: 186). This concerns the theme of the mirror as well as that of the double, “which at the moment I cannot follow” (Bibikhin 2009a: 190). But even when at a loss to understand or analyze something, it is always possible to turn our attention towards it.

Once again we have found ourselves redirected from the theme of the living mirror and the universal twin toward the theme of learned ignorance. Here “we are talking about things that one may not, before the final decisive end, the definitive failure, know, and that need to be known in some fashion, because they cannot be known in themselves” (Bibikhin 2009a: 221). The imperative is to know and not know simultaneously. This is an intrinsic quality not only of poetry, but in fact of philosophy as well. The mirroring preserved by Plato in the dialogues of Socrates is centered on his epistemological *amechania*, so to speak, his admission: I know that I know nothing.

Socratic learned ignorance implies the Platonic dialectic of unity and duality. Duality is not reduced to unity, but maintains its strange, mysterious independence. Bibikhin expresses the relationship toward this duality thus:

Two will never become one. The gospel of the double, the twin, Thomas, where such a purpose is set forth, did not become canonical. That does not mean that we should abandon our double, our mendicant as he is. By remembering him, we have already changed something (Bibikhin 2009a: 229).

Admitting one's own ignorance does not mean falling into passivity. On the contrary, it is a particular form of agency. Bibikhin is categorical on this point: "I claim that this is the very limit of human knowledge—frankly and decisively *not knowing* the formula of the relationship between word and deed, *not knowing* where the event is..." (Bibikhin 2009a: 372). Now the meaning of the negative answer to my question on the essence of the living mirror which I heard from Bibikhin's lips becomes clearer.

The Grammar of Poetry closes with the following question: "We are doubles, twins, with—God?" (Bibikhin 2009a: 232). Who is being called to answer? The next big thematic layer where the phenomenon of the living mirror appears and to which Bibikhin turns is the problem of matter, of nature and the cosmos. His book *The Wood(s)* (2011) is devoted to this theme. Let us once more follow the same guide, with the same interest, through the woods. This is a book about the riddle of matter, internally essential to life, about the living as such. Is matter too, like the knowledge and the word surveyed above, also a living mirror?

The mirroring of the natural is presented through the "pervasive mimesis" that penetrates it, where what is primary and what is secondary cannot be differentiated (Bibikhin 2011: 396). In the cosmos, everything imitates everything to such an extent that one cannot determine whether monkey imitates man or vice versa. Mimesis is a synonym for mirroring. The world of the human and the world of nature and mutual mirror reflections. Bibikhin writes,

the world is inside out, it looks backwards at itself, puts itself on display. It is as if nature has a need to turn itself inside out like that, repeat itself, show itself in how the human world order plays out [...] after all of the riches of the living world, there is nothing left for the monkey but to imitate; the monkey is like a recoil reaction, a reverse movement, a mirror that the universe has placed here for itself. The human being, all the more so, is such a mirror (Bibikhin 2009a: 214–215).

Switching to universal philosophical categories, the relationship between matter and idea is also one of mirroring. Although the difference

between them is equal to that between being and nonbeing. Bibikhin writes:

Matter is drawn toward plenitude, toward the *eidos*. It is drawn to such an extent that matter itself, looking initially at the whole, gives of itself all the parts that are needed for there to be a whole. That is, the whole is already there. But it is not there. It is there. It is not there. It is interesting, *all* the interest is here. Is and is not, being and nonbeing in one and the same thing (Bibikhin 2009a: 171).

The alternation of being and nonbeing, giving rise to the alternation of knowledge and ignorance and merging in the duality of learned ignorance. From the ontological perspective, we can state the following about this question: that which exists, exists as one. But if there exists the possibility of doubling that which exists, then it simultaneously exists and does not exist. Duality, like a living mirror, is both being and nonbeing in one.

The living mirror is not merely a metaphorical concept of speculative philosophy. (Properly speaking, duality can only be expressed through metaphor, being a “transfer” of one meaning between one moment and another, as opposed to an unambiguous term defining a single thing in existence). The natural sciences also approach this with caution, striving to be strict and based on actual facts. For example, what is called the anthropic principle in cosmology, so far not proven, but as a postulate, speaks of this question. In the light of this principle, Bibikhin writes, the universe “is constructed in such a way that its meaning and purpose include a two-way connection, a gaze within itself” (Bibikhin 2009a: 211).

Nature or matter is, according to Bibikhin, a living automaton (read: living mirror), introducing into itself the self-propulsion of life. Contemporary natural science, in arriving at this idea, reproduces past philosophical intuitions and speculations. Bibikhin juxtaposes contemporary science and Leibnizian metaphysics, in both of which “the automaton is inside an automaton, and the automaton is automated down to the smallest details, integrated into the world machine, which also does not have an external clockmaker, but an internal one” (Bibikhin 2009a: 295).

The enigma of living matter, by which Bibikhin is spellbound, consists in its self-generation. A clear example of this is the biological phenomenon of twinning. Bibikhin writes:

True twins, who are born bearing an absolute resemblance to one another, develop from the division of one cell in the uterus into two. In these cases, which are, it is true, rare, and not indispensable to humanity, nature suddenly shows that she is capable, that she knows how to facilitate straightforward, simple duplication (Bibikhin 2009a: 334).

But this theme is almost taboo for Bibikhin. In *The Wood(s)*, he again admits:

The theme of the double has once again brushed its wing against us, a theme so central for me that up to now I still feel hesitant about working on it in front of other people [...] this theme is also one that seems to burn quickly and then sweeps past us (Bibikhin 2009a: 40).

The unbearable difficulty for the human being here consists in the fact that “man himself is inaccessible to himself like a double. And this is quite dissimilar from the idea that the enigma of the double must remain an enigma, as if it doesn’t concern him” (Bibikhin 2009a: 329).

It does concern him, to say the least, and Bibikhin therefore risks putting forward this quick-burning theme in front of other people:

...the circle of things we have examined in different ways, the theme of the *other*, the other self or second self, the double and twin, and dreams, like that circle it is not difficult, but it is *close to us*, it is all too close and closer than pragmatism allows. And we will be searching for God, if we search at all, also close by, in that closeness where he becomes our twin, and, thinking of Heraclitus, of his identity of gods and men, between whom the only difference lies in their mortality or immortality. What is a god. It is man himself, that very man, not the one who became immortal thanks to medicine, but the one who is another to himself (Bibikhin 2009a: 329).

It turns out that all things, God, the world, man, language, and nature, as well as history and culture, are marked by the properties of doubling and the living mirror. What else did we leave out of the list? Wisdom, thought, philosophy—that goes without saying. “Philosophy is a mirror in which we do not want to recognize ourselves. We delegate to it what truly belongs to us” (Bibikhin 2007: 105). And, of course, the word—“the word re-sounds [...] like a living echo” (Bibikhin 2009b: 455). Who can guess and observe the ubiquity of these phenomena in everything? One who is himself a living mirror and everyone’s twin? Do we know this or do we not know it?

If we examine the process by which the history of philosophy developed in this light, it begins to appear not as a sequence connecting the separate points of separate figures, but rather a continuum of pairs of twins. This kind of stereoscopic history of philosophy has yet to be written. But to Bibikhin’s attentive gaze, the following pairs are visible: Parmenides and Heraclitus (“one commentator—the best—on Parmenides appears in his *alter* ego, Heraclitus” (Bibikhin 2009b: 352); Heidegger and Losev (“can it be that the Russian thinker Losev was close to Heidegger [...] *it is not possible* for two such philosophers, like doubles, not to think of the same thing?” (Bibikhin 2010b: 260); Kierkegaard and Gogol

("Kierkegaard and Gogol are twins in so many notable features that I am not even going to enumerate all that unifies them, so as not to deprive others of the pleasure of this discovery" (Bibikhin 2010a: 265). Is Bibikhin visible in this continuum of twin stars? Together with Rozanov?

In twentieth-century philosophy the problem of the "mirror" concept was examined from various perspectives. One need but mention Lacan's "mirror stage" of early childhood identification, Heidegger's "mirror-play of the world fourfold," and Rorty's epistemological critique of the "mirror of nature. We may surmise that Bibikhin, too, made a discovery of his own in studying this problem. But what did he discover exactly?

What have we acquired from the work done here? What property do we have? What legacy have we received from Bibikhin, whether through a gift or an equal exchange? He has devoted a whole book to the problem of property. The questions addressed in it include the property of man, who, it would appear, owns many things. But all of these many possessions disappear with time. What remains as man's inalienable property? Bibikhin's answer is: "redemptive knowledge of ignorance, amechania, a halt on mechanisms, cautious thoughtful restraint, humble attention" (Bibikhin 2012: 190).

It then remains to ask Bibikhin: how can this living ignorance be acquired? And in response, no doubt, receive the following answer:

Again I do not know! I only know quite definitely that this fall into the knowledge of *my own* ignorance is something I need, it is redemptive, there is nothing that will be better or dearer for me than this fall, and I would never, never want to change this unfinished measuring of my own infinite ignorance for a 'theory,' a 'conviction,' a 'world view'; I will never have any desire to lose this footing, it is the only sure foundation. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the most precise, the ultimate, the final knowledge consists in what we are talking about, it is the knowledge of our ignorance... (Bibikhin 2012: 210).

And to think how troubled I was when I received that answer to my question from Bibikhin: "I do not know." Now it is clear that he was presenting me with a gift. Sending the unlearned back to the school of Socrates—

...it is the school for your school, it introduces you only to itself, teaches ignorance, it is the school or science of ignorance, arrant ignorance. It is unconditional, it is the lot of man, beyond this ignorance man will never go, nor should he. That is all. The circle is closed. There is honestly nothing you can do about it. Man simply *does not know* about the most important things. War begins in a man himself, beginning between him and himself, from irritation at the hopelessness of his ignorance (Bibikhin 2012: 214).

Perhaps we can see an adequate poetic description of such *irritation* in Vladislav Khodasevich's poem "Before the mirror": "Me, me, me! What a wild word! / Is that one there—really me? / Did Mama really love such a one, / Yellow-grayish, half-graying / And all-knowing like a snake?" (Khodasevich 1989: 174). The mirror, giving a chance for identification to the self-knowing personality, also possesses the means to destroy it. Omniscience, once it has arisen in the mirror's screen, dissolves in the same place. "No, it wasn't a panther with his jumps / That chased me to a Parisian garret. / And it is not Virgil standing there behind me / There is but loneliness—in a frame / Speaking the truth of glass" (Khodasevich 1989: 174).

Translated by Timothy Williams

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