

## Critique, Reflection and Ontological Insecurity

In this article, we will explore the individual and cultural consequences of privileging reflection and critique. Reasoning, which works with concepts that are the product of reflection, gained ascendancy as a reaction against the irrationality of religious warfare that preceded the Enlightenment. The critical disposition works by undermining one's existential commitment to one's prereflective beliefs, assumptions, and premises. We will suggest that such undermining is an under-acknowledged constituent of the modern sensibility. While it has been long understood that scepticism allows one to transcend irrational beliefs, the resulting ontological insecurity has not received enough attention. Privileging reflective thought, we argue, favours living representationally rather than interactionally. That is, reflection and critique can lead one to be caught in an internal labyrinth of thought. Correspondingly, the over-utilization of reflection results in the attenuation of direct, prereflective contact with the environment, and to a reluctance to commit one's beliefs to action. This suggests that the relative impotence of political progressives might result from an ironic stance that bespeaks reflective disengagement.

With critique, as Lyotard (1984) noted, a certain ~~declaration~~ of work is displayed in its insufficiency. He challenged the imbedded implication—critique's unjustifiable claim to pre-eminence over what is criticized. We would like to push deeper into the critical procedures that he problematized. Primarily we wish to point out that critique presupposes the capacity to reflect. With reflection, one steps back from immediate engagement with the environment in order to inspect one's internal representations. Merleau-Ponty (1964) termed this move, the "theoretical attitude". This attitude was employed by an "I" that seeks to be a pure knower and "to spread all things out before itself—and to 'objectify' and gain intellectual possession of them" (162). It is a mistake, according to Merleau-Ponty, to take that "attitude" as absolute. His claim is that the "natural" or "personalist attitude" involves a higher truth, which we must regain: "Prior to all reflection, in conversation and the practices of life, we maintain a 'personalist attitude' that the [theoretical attitude] cannot account for" (163).

Our claim is that by making reflection and the theoretical attitude absolute we inadvertently diminish the world's ontological presence. We aim to examine the consequences of such a move. Toward that end, we explore cases of persons with schizophrenia, who employ excessive reflexivity both as an effect and as a cause of an ontological catastrophe (see Sass, 1992). Because of the extremity of their condition, they make certain consequences visible that might be occurring in a more muted form in the population at large (see Mälkki 2011a; 2011b).

Secondly, and associated with privileging the reflective, we wish to examine the belief in the *enduring* aptness of meanings and suggest that stable or fixed meanings rapidly lose their ability to accurately symbolize a world in flux. At their most primitive level,

meanings arise as representations of the world in which we live. We assume a faithful correspondence between the sign and its referent. While this belief may have been “good enough” during traditional and even early to mid- modern times, we wonder about its efficacy for our time. Our intention, therefore, is to explore the possibility that in the west, we currently lack the symbols or meanings that would enable us to consciously navigate liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Toward overcoming that lacuna, two or three concepts are possible exemplars of what we seek: “liminality”, “liquid modernity”, and “zombie categories”. The first two of these shift or morph the cultural landscape in which we now find ourselves. The last concept refers to a process where outmoded categories are utilized in a futile attempt to make sense of an emergent cultural phenomenon.

### *Our Framework*

Throughout this article, we will be looking for parallels between the individual and collective levels. For example, on an individual level, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) noted, anxiety is the liquefaction of everything that once was solid. Compare this with, Marx’s comment regarding the collective effect of capitalism: “all that was solid, melts in the air”. We will claim that from both an individualistic and a collectivist perspective, a condition of liminality is being named, which gives rise to a host of epistemological questions because most of the traditional candidates for ground have been problematized. Szokolczai (2009) suggested that liminal individuals are not able to act rationally “because the structure on which ‘objective’ rationality was based has disappeared” (154). We suggest that such is the case for the collective in our time of liquid modernity.

### *The Historical Valorisation of the Reflective*

Through the Enlightenment project and during the “age of reason” there was an attempt to employ rational scepticism to undo the harmful effects of superstition, dogma, and blind faith. That is, the Enlightenment employed a methodology of doubt in order to first loosen, then dissolve the binding power of irrational beliefs.

The material with which critique works is the product of reflection. Reflection produces a set of clear and distinct concepts. Through critical thinking, we analyse how those basic units combine; we test their reliability via the rules of logic. However, critique can overlook how those clear and distinct concepts came to be. That is, it elides the open-ended and on-going creative process and tends to understand its basic units as finished products.

The Enlightenment’s privileging of the reflective was constitutive of modernity in the following ways: The cultural or collective dimension of the Enlightenment reached its apogee with the development and establishment of the scientific method. That method privileged and enacted “the view from nowhere” as the means to more closely achieve objectivity. Reflection was used to identify, then bracket, the biases, desires, and interests of the researcher. That is, the subject was removed from the account<sup>1</sup>. Stated in this manner, that approach seems absurd. But perhaps that is only apparent looking back from the twenty-first century. Weber (2011), a sociologist and philosopher, was much closer to this cultural shift as he lived in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to Weber, this shift eventually produced a disenchanting world where scientific abstractions were more highly valued than personal belief<sup>2</sup>. The unforeseen consequences of privileging sceptical criticism over affirmation have been partially articulated by

Horkheimer and Adorno (1972):

So, “ruthlessly, in spite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness”, until “every specific theoretic view succumbs to the destructive criticism that it is only a belief—until the very notions of spirit, truth, even Enlightenment itself, have become animistic magic”. (152, emphasis added)

Viewed this way, scepticism’s corrosive nature is revealed. The condition Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) described is currently being played out as a kind of panic over the (im)possibility of finding suitable ground for thought. Religion, metaphysics, and empiricism, have all been problematized. Cynicism, nihilism, and fundamentalism are a few of the varied responses to this perceived vacuum. The term “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000) acknowledges our loss of ground (without the pejorative tone inhering in “cynicism, nihilism, and fundamentalism”).

Liotard (in Dews, 1987), articulates how this gets played out in the academy:

[B]y 1972 he has concluded that the very concept of critique implies an unjustifiable claim to pre-eminence over what is criticized: ‘critical activity is an activity of selection: a certain experience, a certain declaration, a certain work...is displayed in its insufficiency, denied therefore, seen from the standpoint of its limit and not of its affirmativity ... from where does the critic draw his power over what is criticized? he knows better? he is the professor, the educator? So he is universality, the university, the state, the city, leaning over childhood, nature, singularity, the dubious, in order to raise it to his own level?’ (202)

Liotard’s thought parallels, but goes further than, our claim that the reflective mind is overvalued in western culture. In particular he makes explicit the “unjustifiable claim to pre-eminence [of critique] over what is criticized”—*the assumed superiority of the methodology of doubt over a practice of affirmation*. By making that claim explicit, he problematizes a position that, in our view, continues to be largely unchallenged in the practices of the humanities. Furthermore, it offers a possible explanation for the apparent impotence of western intellectuals. Here we are referring to the apparently unshakable beliefs of conservative Republicans as compared to the “pragmatic”, ironic beliefs of progressive Democrats. Left leaning intellectuals, who have been schooled in doubt, have learned that today’s truth will be replaced by tomorrow’s revision and so hold their beliefs provisionally. This disposition contributed to producing a first-term president who, according to his critics, was willing to compromise on almost everything; whereas his opponents insisted on preserving the purity of their position. Yeats put it succinctly; “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity”.

From the viewpoint of the individual, the Enlightenment’s privileging of the reflective may be seen to be constitutive of modernity by generating a particular subjectivity. Cartesian duality, which separated the subjective from the objective, increasingly emphasized a skin-

encapsulated ego over here, operating on an objective world, over there. We suggest that Cartesian axioms eventually colonized prereflective experience such that experience seemed to confirm Cartesian assumptions.<sup>3</sup> This process was constitutive of the modern person as an isolated, autonomous, and rational individual. The Cartesian model eventually manifested as a shared social imaginary (Taylor, 2004) and thus functioned as the assumptive ground that structured individual experience. That is to say that what was once a philosophical idea—the separation of subject and object by an unbridgeable gap—was absorbed into common sense, part of the taken for granted. Rather than beings-in-the-world we had become spectators in a Cartesian theatre of representations.

### *Definition of Terms*

For our purposes the prereflective has three aspects:

1. As a repository of response potentials or an inventory of behavioural skills. These prereflective skills are used spontaneously—that is, without conscious intent. For example, when I write in long hand I am not conscious of forming the letters, my prereflective skills do that for me. Rather I am conscious of the content that I am attempting to communicate.
2. Its primary orientation is perceptual rather than conceptual. Attention is directed toward the environment and not toward mental representations. For example, when playing table tennis I am not thinking symbolically but rather perceiving and responding.
3. An inventory of predispositions composed of unsymbolized experiences. That is, it tends to assimilate unique environmental events to patterns previously experienced. For example, a man is prereflectively attracted to women with high foreheads because his mother had a high forehead and she nourished him. This man would not be consciously aware of this predisposition but an outside observer might notice it. This tendency to assimilate the emergent to the previously encountered serves the subject in some cases and is detrimental in others.

For our purposes the reflective is defined and described as follows:

1. It is dependent on symbolization. That is, recurrent patterns have been formulated as linguistic representations that can be communicated, examined, and critiqued.
2. Attention is directed inward rather than toward the environment. Reflection works with representation rather than perception. In the example above, the man might reflect on commonalities between his various mates and discover that they all had high foreheads like his mother. He would then be able to explicitly represent this abstracted criterion.
3. Reflection involves taking a third person point of view towards one's self. Instead of being a first person experience, one stands "outside one's self" and views one's self as an object. Self-concept and self-image would be examples of representing oneself to oneself.

We acknowledge that the concept of "reflexivity" has been interpreted a number of different ways. Lynch (2000) lists 19 different meanings culled from his review of the literature. This diversity speaks to the complexity of the topic we are investigating. All his

"reflexivities" involve "some sort of recursive turning back" (34), some sort of attending to the framework through which the object or concept had originally been constituted. It is this recurring attending to, and revision of, the internal framing of the phenomenon in question that our paper addresses itself when it uses the terms reflection and reflexivity.

One final methodological note before proceeding: We discuss the phenomenon of reflexivity largely from the point of view of the agent and by so doing we might give the impression of a voluntaristic schema, as though reflexivity was an individual achievement. While we highlight the individual agent's contribution to reflexivity, we also wish to contextualize it within a zeitgeist that privileges the reflexive stance. That stance is given thorough treatment in Sass's (1992) *Madness and modernism: Insanity in the light of modern, art, literature, and thought*. There, Sass draws parallels between those creative individuals who were exemplars of modernity and the individuals with hyperreflexive schizophrenia with whom he had worked as a psychiatrist and researcher. Citing cultural figures such as Wittgenstein, Beckett, Joyce, Woolfe, and Giorgio de Chirico, among others, Sass demonstrates that these iconic individuals exhibited many of the characteristic modalities of experience that we find in heightened form in those with schizophrenia. His tentative conclusion is that modern western culture could be both a product, and a producer of schizoid tendencies that emphasize disengagement and withdrawal while emphasizing overly cognitive modes of functioning. He employs a number of different points of view to support this claim. For example, he points at the relationship between a modern culture that is primarily *visual* and the schizoid tendencies that it seems to foster:

There seems to be a number of characteristics—affectless, separation, sense of control—that are shared by the schizoid orientation and *the visual modality*. One might expect that a *visually oriented culture* would be especially likely to encourage, or at least to allow, the development of schizoid tendencies in its members. (Sass, 1992: 446, emphasis added)

He suggests that in many modernists' works, "the world seems to be *derealized*, robbed of its substantiality or objectivity, its ontological status as an entity or horizon independent of the perceiving subject" (Sass, 1992: 32). Again, this parallels the experiential report of many people with hyperreflexive schizophrenia. When they take up the reflective, rather than the engaged position, their world begins to transform into "wallpaper" ... a faded, sketchy backdrop rather than an ontological presence.

In addition, he draws on the work of the more influential literary critics of the twentieth century,

The critic Clement Greenberg identifies modernism with "the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant." This can lead to what Nietzsche called "the most extreme form of nihilism": the view that there is no true world, since everything is but "a *perspectival appearance* whose origin lies in us." And this recognition of one's own centrality can, in turn be experienced...as a despairing recognition of the ultimate meaninglessness and absurdity of the human world, a succumbing to what Nietzsche called

“the great blood-sucker, the spider skepticism”. (Sass, 1992: 31)

Nietzsche arrives at the same conclusion as Lyotard. Both suggest that critique focuses on the limitations of an idea or theory and thereby drains it (sucks the blood) of its affirmative value. His observation cautions us regarding the possibility that it only *appears* that the theory is sterile. Its apparent sterility might not be intrinsic to the theory but rather is a product of the position that the critic has adopted. That is to say, that the critic’s vitality, as well as their consciousness, has taken up the reflexive position and thus no longer animates the theory. As a result, one no longer thinks *with* the theory but rather, *against* it. Both dispositions have their value but modernity seems to have neglected thinking *with*, in favour of thinking *against*.

Having established at least the possibility that there is a reciprocally influencing dynamic between a hyper-rational culture and members with schizoid tendencies, we would like to return to a closer examination of a typical individual. We hope that by so doing, a psychological understanding will emerge that interprets the modern privileging of reflexivity over immediacy.

Edelman (2006) employs an vocabulary that is deceptively simple,

Dogs and other animals, if they are aware, have *primary consciousness*. This is the experience of a unitary scene in a time period of at the most seconds that I call the remembered present ... Although they are aware of ongoing events, animals with primary consciousness are *not conscious of being conscious* and do not have the concept of the past, the future, or a nameable self.

Such notions require the ability to experience *higher-order consciousness*, and this depends on having semantic or symbolic capabilities .... With the ability to speak, we can free ourselves temporarily from the limitations of the remembered present. Nonetheless, at all times *when higher-order consciousness is present we also possess primary consciousness*. (15, emphasis added)

An implication of Edelman’s (2006) assertions is that the experience of being a conscious being is dependent on having “semantic or symbolic capabilities”. This capacity frees us from the “here and now” of our current circumstance<sup>4</sup>. Only with symbolic capability can I represent a conscious, nameable self—a self upon which I can reflect.

We suggest that the awareness of having a separate, conscious self does not exist in prereflective experience. Support for this claim comes from an experiment performed by Deikman (1966). His participants were to look at a blue vase for a half hour over ten trials. He instructed them to attend to (perceive) the blue vase without lapsing into thinking (cognition). One participant reported the following:

One of the points that I remember most vividly is when I really began to feel, you know, almost as though the blue and I were perhaps merging, or

that vase and I were. I almost get scared to the point where I found myself bringing myself back in some way from it.

It was though everything was sort of merging and I was somehow *losing my sense of consciousness almost*. (Deikman, 1966: 83, emphasis added)

As the subject invested in perception—which we hold to be a prereflective modality— she began to lose her experience of being a separate, Cartesian subject.

This indicates that modern consciousness involves two modalities, both the ability to reflect and the ability to be, to do, to feel, to react—without thinking. As implied in our definition of terms, the prereflective is the repository of the habitual and the taken-for-granted. It is the ground or background on which the figure or representations of higher-order consciousness are displayed, revealed and worked. It is the assumptive ground that supports our conscious projects. These two modalities are not to be taken as operating independently however. As Edelman (2006) also notes, both primary and higher order consciousnesses operate simultaneously. In our view, this is a matter of the ratio between the prereflective and reflective that determines which of them, at a given moment, is predominant in awareness. The above experiment indicates, that effort was required in order for the participant to overcome her habitual privileging of the reflective and instead experience a more direct, prereflective contact with the environment. With her increasing absorption in perception, she became alarmed by the attendant loss of her spectator status—“my sense of consciousness”. We suggest that what was being lost was consciousness of a separate, Cartesian self. Similarly, as reflective consciousness has increasingly come to dominate in western culture, experiencing immediacy has become more difficult for modern people. Later in the paper we will cite a number of examples where immediacy has had terrifying effects on various individuals. It might not be too far a stretch to suggest that the pre-moderns experienced immediacy as awe; where for the modern individual, immediacy has become awful (not awe full). For these reasons it appears justified to state, that reflexivity is constitutive of the modern sense of self.

#### *A Historical Review of the Relationship Between the Reflective and Prereflective*

In this section, we will provide a broad outline of the historical processes that contributed to the dominant role that reflexivity plays for the modern subject. Specifically, we suggest that Cartesian premises, which had been introduced during the Enlightenment, gradually became part of the collective understanding of how “things worked”. As cultural assumptions, they migrated inward and came to structure the prereflective self. In this way, culture becomes one’s “second nature”. If we define customs, traditions, and the social imaginary as collective ways of making sense, then it becomes obvious that the prereflective and these collective practices exist in a reciprocal relationship. This being the case, then if the accelerating pace of change washed away the soil of established customs, traditions, and religions, then the prereflective would be rooted in very shallow ground. We suggest that anxiety and depression would be the superficial descriptors for what actuality is widespread ontological insecurity. Just as some individual’s are genetically predisposed to a heightened sensitivity to environmental degradation, some individuals will become symptomatic as a reaction to ontological insecurity.

Taylor (2004) indicates that social imaginaries are not a set of ideas but rather a more

elusive set of self understandings, background practices, and horizons of common expectations that are not always explicitly articulated, but that give a people a sense of a shared group life (Crocker, 2005). Initially, however, these ways of making sense were introduced into the culture as a set of ideas and, over time, came to be assumed and enacted in the culture at large. Because they are so widely assumed they have a functional value: they help organize our interactions. This partially explains their persistence. However, one may wonder, if their staying power arises because they also accurately thematize the operations of the reflective mind. That is, Descartes's depictions are phenomenologically faithful. One's reflective mind works more with concepts than with objects in the world. Or, perhaps one's concepts are "stand ins" or representation for those objects. Those concepts and representations supposedly "mediate" the gulf that separates the Cartesian mind from the objective world. However, while this account of human functioning accurately represents conceptual thinking, it naturally omits prereflective operations. That is to say, the very method of reflective thinking occludes the prereflective. This outcome is exacerbated by language, which also directs our attention to conceptual functioning. Frameworks operate by exclusion. A boundary is drawn. Everything within that boundary is potentially legitimate while everything outside, simply doesn't exist. For example, a quantitative framework assumes "if it can't be counted, it doesn't count". Similarly the prereflective, by definition, can not be included in a representational system. The representation depicts a stable world of separate and distinct things and events, regardless of their actual nature. Thus, representation starts to govern what we believe to be "there" and how we conceive of ourselves, which, then again, feeds back into the prereflective to shape our given experience. As a result reflective meaning persists and lingers while we are seldom aware of our transient prereflective experience. In other words, what can be expressed through language tends to persist and that which has not yet been given form, our experience, tends, in comparison, to be transient—a stream of becoming.

*The Changing Social Context: From Modernism to Liquid Modernity*

Bauman (2000) claimed that the modernity project included the elimination of ambivalence and ambiguity and the production of certainty. Its primary method for so doing was through a classification system of binaries. Left versus right; black versus white; liberal versus conservative; man versus woman; right versus wrong, truth versus false, real versus unreal. Rather than continuums that combine ratios, these categories hold content that are mutually exclusive and therefore leave no space for ambiguity.

Bauman (2000) introduced the notion of liquid modernity, which he claimed was the acknowledgement that ambivalence and ambiguity are the inescapable condition of human subjectivity. Those boundaries that separate subject from object, the "me" from the "not-me", and all concepts from each other, are melting. That is, modern categories are no longer "naturalized" but are increasingly viewed as socially constructed and therefore revisable. Categories are being stripped of their absolute nature. This loss is disorienting for many. This is especially true with regards to the "ur" boundary that purportedly separates the subject from the object. Recall the participant in the earlier cited experiment (Deikman, 1966) who felt she was losing consciousness as she merged with the object. Another participant reported the dissolving of all boundaries that previously would have articulated his world

It was as though we were together, you know, instead of being a table and a vase and me, my body and the chair, it all dissolved into a bundle of something which had ... a great deal of energy to it but which doesn't form into anything but it only feels like a force. (Deikman, 1966: 84)

It seems to us that the dissolving of boundaries that this experiment so aptly reveals might also be occurring in the culture at large. If this were true, it would identify our time as a transitional or liminal period where the structures that permit modern reflexivity and critique have been problematized. Those dispositions presupposed a Cartesian paradigm with its distinctive separations of subject and object. The Cartesian model had substituted an inner model of representations—a Cartesian theatre—for direct interaction with the world. While the postmodern problems of identity have often been seen to be caused by the accelerated pace of change, we suggest, that these problems may, also, stem from the fact that during the modern period people gradually lost their ability to interpret their experience directly and precisely—relying instead on the stock of common phrases. While employing stock phrases might have been “good enough” in a traditional or even modern culture, that may no longer be the case in contemporary times.

It seems that liquid modernity requires that we, once more, learn to attend to the self-world feedback loop rather than to the conceptual models and master narratives that helped shape modernity. We might be moving into an era that foregrounds attending to one's circumstances; to the results of one's actions; to what is required to carry forward the developing situation—in short, attending to how the world “talks back” to us. Gendlin (1997), a philosopher and psychotherapist, put it this way:

Today, in the West, society no longer gives the individual any one scheme or set of forms with which to interpret experience. The individual is aware of many different, contradictory, and unrelated forms and schemes. *Thus he has to come to confront life and experiencing directly.* (4, emphasis added)

From our point of view, Gendlin (1997) is recommending that we attend to the particular rather than assimilating the particular into a general framework (master narrative, ideology, paradigm, etc.).

### *The Schizophrenic Experience*

As we stated earlier, persons with schizophrenia clearly reveal the problems associated with excessive reflexivity. Because of the extremity of their condition, they make certain phenomenon (flat affect, overly cognitive, etc.) visible that might be occurring in a more muted form in the population at large. What is to follow draws on the first author's knowledge of the vicissitudes of psychological development:

Let us begin with an interpretation of the etiology of schizophrenia. During the prodromal phase of schizophrenia, the person recoils from their prereflective experience because their familiar sensibility has been replaced with an uncanny one. With the occurrence of such a catastrophe, the person with schizophrenia no longer feels at home. We interpret hyper-reflexivity as a desperate attempt to compensate for that loss of ground. As I write this I am

reminded of a client who was an adult child of a parents who struggled with alcoholism. Her upbringing was so inconsistent and chaotic that she never developed a taken-for-granted way of being in the world. Instead she vigilantly scanned her surroundings and self-consciously constructed studied responses. Persons with schizophrenia differ from that client in that they seemed to live from a reliable prereflective at one time—only to experience its catastrophic change some time later. Both my exemplary client and many people with schizophrenia are dependent upon reflexivity to navigate through their day.

### *Self-Disorders<sup>5</sup> and the Postmodern Condition*

In this section, we wish to explore possible parallels between individuals experiencing self-disorders and the cultural phenomenon termed postmodernism. After a brief description of self-disorder we will move on to a thought experiment conceived by the psychologist and philosopher, William James (1982). He described a world from which the self has withdrawn—an "objective" world. We will use his description as a bridge linking self-disorder to the scientific worldview and then to postmodernism.

A self-disorder affects one's fundamental way of being in the world. It is akin to an ontological shock. Two terms—derealisation and depersonalization—highlight different aspects of this shock. With the former, one feels that the world is no longer real; one has been catapulted into an unreal world. With depersonalization, on the other hand, the self no longer feels real. These experiences are not exclusive to people who are diagnosed as suffering from a self-disorder. When an average person exclaims that a certain experience was "surreal", they are probably experiencing a temporary episode of a world-made-strange. Some less fortunate individuals who experience this shift as permanent and total, attempt to escape the catastrophe by fleeing to their reflective mind. They are recoiling from their suddenly strange or alien sensibility. By doing so they perform a kind of self-evisceration in that they no longer inhabit their prereflective source. No longer living *from within* the taken for granted, they adopt a third person rather than first person point of view. Self-consciousness or reflective consciousness has become the dominant mode of experience and spontaneity goes missing.

We turn our attention to James (1982) thought experiment, which he articulated in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James asks us to,

Conceive yourself ... suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, interest, or perspective. (147-148)

That is, when personal investment is withdrawn, the world appears to be "without significance, character, interest or perspective". We see parallels here between James' (1982) thought experiment and the reported experience of panic disordered clients<sup>6</sup>—nothing calls to them; no feature of their world is highlighted. Everything is levelled out. Consequently, they do not know how to proceed. Furthermore, a similar condition is being

articulated with postmodernism's flattened hierarchy of values. That is, through attempting to see from a number of perspectives, the extreme postmodern worldview gives each viewpoint equal weight. Differing cultural perspectives can not be arranged in a hierarchy because to do would posit a criterion that assigns value to each perspective according to some transcendent value outside of, and greater than, the competing perspectives (see Trigg, 2001). For example, if a relatively homogenous and coherent culture preserved a place for the sacred, then all points of view would be measured against their approximation with, and fidelity to, that sacred. The result would be a hierarchy of perspectives—from the sacred to the secular to the profane. However, with cultural relativism “no one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another”. The difference between James' description and the postmodernism characterization sketched out here is that the former identifies a causal factor: the withdrawal of one's personal engagement with the world.

Postmodernism's pronouncements, on the other hand, seem to naturalize this condition—they describe a world without a subject. Musil (1965) anticipates this condition in *The Man Without Qualities*: “What has arisen is a world of qualities without a man, of experiences without someone to experience them” (P. 217). Gendlin (1997) makes a similar claim in the following:

[Heidegger] convinced many philosophers to reject the subject/object distinction, but now there seems to be no way to talk about ourselves. And the topic we seem unable to discuss is still called “the human subject”. (8)

According to Gendlin (1997) the human subject has been elided from a scientific understanding of the world. I'm suggesting that the elimination of the first person point of view, that is the hallmark of the scientific orientation, mirrors and amplifies the individual's disengagement from the world to which James (1982) referred. That is, the psychological act of reflection and science's purging of subjectivity mutually reinforce each other. Philosophy also makes its contribution. According to Hatab (1997):

[T]he practice of philosophy requires a reflective pause from world involvement.... But here philosophers have been guilty of imposing a model of knowing that simply follows from the way philosophers think that *misses or distorts other forms of engagement*. In other words, philosophical reflection itself can lead to obfuscation of human experience and its circumstances. (242, emphasis added)

Both scientific and philosophic methodologies tend towards producing a world that is “without [personal] significance, character, interest, or perspective” (James, 1982). Not all philosophers however, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) points out: “Prior to all reflection, in conversation and the practices of life, we maintain a ‘personalist attitude’ that [scientific] naturalism cannot account for” (163).

We would find it impossible to go forward with our lives without this personalist attitude. Such a consequence is, in fact, the disaster that some people with schizophrenia experience. We will explore this in some detail later in the article. For now, however, we will explore panic disorder to suggest parallel phenomena in the collective: For example, does western

culture oscillate between apathy and hysteria as do Green's, the first author, exemplary, panic disordered clients? These clients recoil in alarm from their experience, escaping instead to a "dead zone" where nothing matters. With the collective, low voter turnout could be symptomatic of an apathetic disconnect, while the spate of end-of-civilization movies (*The Road*, *Time of the Wolf*, and *Melancholia* to name but a few) might reveal and express preconscious, catastrophic fears.

Just as these clients' symptoms arose as both a cause and an effect of their disconnect from the ground of their experience, philosophic scepticism and critique seem to have eroded the collective's "common ground". Eagleton (2010) seemed to be pointing to that conclusion with his claim that the Muslim revival laid bare the contradiction between our need, in the west, to believe and our inability to do so. According to Eagleton, postmodernists claim that all passionate conviction is dogmatic while certainty is associated with authoritarianism. While we undercut our ground, the Muslims stand firmly on theirs. Wittgenstein (1969) stated that some things must be exempt from doubt in order for human practices to be possible. It seems that critique axiomatically rules out any exemptions. This suggests that western culture is governed by a methodology of doubt while the Muslim world is generated by an affirmation of faith.

#### *Weak Thought and an Alternative*

How did conviction come to be viewed as dogmatic and certainty as authoritarian, as Eagleton (2010) claimed? We suggest it is because we've internalized the Cartesian distinction between subject and object that implies that all mentation is representational. Throughout this paper we have suggested that reflection and representational thinking produce ontological insecurity. But this insecurity is not the only problem resulting from adopting the Cartesian paradigm. Earlier we quoted Gendlin's (1997) observation that since Heidegger (1967) problematized the subject/object distinction there seemed to be no way to talk about the "human subject". Later in the passage from which that quote was excerpted, Gendlin (1997) challenges the primacy given to perception by philosophy. Perhaps, in what follows, he has identified a contributor to western malaise:

Perception always divides what is seemingly over there from a perceiver here.... Science presents the world as something observed, something external, consisting of percepts. But this depends on an idealized observer who supplies the connections.... The objects are there; we are dropped out of the universe. We are elevated to be its "constructors," disembodied, floating beside the universe. Within the universe presented by science we seem impossible. But we know something is wrong with this, since we are here. (Gendlin, 1997: 14–15)

An account of living that leaves the person out of the equation is an absurdity. Factoring out the human in this way tends to promote a passive, spectator role. Could it be that this intellectualist move eventuates ultimately in weak thought (Vattimo, 1991). Gendlin (1997) offers an alternative. He gives interaction, not perception, primacy. "Between two people there is *one* interaction" (Gendlin, 1997: 15, emphasis added). He is implying that the unit of study is the complete circuit, the complete feedback loop, that is, the interaction of self with environment. A being-in-the-world.

Our claim, therefore, is that we cannot extract ourselves (from this circuit) to achieve “the view from nowhere” without producing a seemingly empty, dead world. What gives the world its significance, according to James (1982), are the emotions that it inspires in us. We go further and claim a relationship between self and world, between one’s emergent needs and the world’s capacity to address those needs. We are not “floating beside the universe” but rather we are imbedded in a situated, embodied interaction.

Prereflective experience is an orientation or disposition to one’s situation. My prereflective needs and desires highlight what counts as an environment for me. Without this initial orientation it is virtually impossible to go forward with efficacy. Multiple perspectives, while possible for the reflective mind, undermine decisive action—instead they can produce the paralysis of over deliberation. The prereflective, on the other hand, intuitively offers a limited number of responses that fit “the overall gestalt of the situation”. The prereflective participates in a feedback loop that relates need to action to circumstance and back again.

### *The Phenomenology of Disconnect*

Earlier we considered a possible explanation of schizophrenia that resulted from a repudiation of their prereflective experience and a desperate valorisation of their reflective mind. We will now turn to a less extreme and more recognizable example of the loss of connection. We offer this example because we would like the reader to have an experiential understanding over and above an intellectual knowing. Green, the first author, is currently working with two individuals who are experiencing this disconnect. They had an affair and left their marriages to be with each other. But their affair ended badly and they separated. During the initial stages of the relationship, they both reported that they were “following their heart”. For each of them, their experience felt more “true and real” than anything that they had previously experienced. Their worlds were infused with meaning. Since their relationship was aborted, however, their daily life looked pointless. Personal significance had vanished from their worlds. Or, more accurately, each prereflective self had recoiled from its engagement with the world leaving behind a lifeless automaton. Their experience had come to resemble a world “without significance, character, interest, or perspective”. (James, 1982. 147-148) Although their experience had gone from meaningful to meaningless, these characterizations should not be confused with questions of truth—in the sense of truth as an eternal verity. What is at issue here concerns ontology rather than epistemology.

What we hope to uncover and reveal with this example of bereft lovers is the psychic dynamic at work when a whole culture steps back from engagement with their situation in favour of reflection and representational thought. We suggest that the disenchanting world that Weber (2011) named can be understood in the same way—a world in which scientific understanding is more highly valued than belief. Here we use the term belief as carrying associations of trust, confidence, and faith—in other words, *a willingness to engage*. We suggest that such a capacity to engage is both the cause and effect of ontological certitude. When we engage, we indubitably know that both the world and our selves are real. On the other hand, when we step back from the world via reflection and representational thought,

everything begins to take on the patina of harmless abstraction. And our capacity to engage with the real atrophies. These bold claims will be supported later through reference to a number of authors who have written about their unmediated personal experience.

*Liminality, Schizophrenia, and Postmodernism*

In what follows, we will compare an individual and a collective condition that can best be characterized as liminal. That is, we will claim that it is useful to think with, or employ, the concept of liminality when considering both schizophrenia and postmodernity. The anthropological notion of liminality is a powerful concept that names and makes sense of a transitional process that occurs between two stable conditions. Or, as the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>7</sup> defines liminality (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “a threshold”): “a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical subjective state ... of being between two different existential planes”. We are interested in what happens in that “in-between” zone where all that was once stable has become fluid. This fluidity seems to be a necessary concomitant to dissolve the old, and make room for a new, more encompassing framework to emerge. Frameworks are paradigmatic in the sense that they provide a set of assumptions for organizing and making sense of one’s experience. Furthermore, in the case of an individual that framework also generates an identity. As that stable identity dissolves it brings about disorientation, but also the possibility of new perspectives. Turner (1969) had something similar in mind in the following:

If liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutiny for the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs’—one where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are undone. (156, emphasis added)

We wish to highlight both effects, “disorientation” and “the possibility of new perspectives”, as these are two aspects of the same process as one moves between “two different existential planes”. And we want to introduce the notion of agency and existential choice. For example, when one contemplates moving to another culture, a career change, or ending a marriage, one realizes that one is standing at the edge of one existential plane and contemplating another. When standing at that threshold, one knows that one’s current life is a composed life—one that requires continual effort to maintain. This reminds one of a Sartre (1964) quotation: “Consciousness is afraid of its own radical freedom because it knows that at any moment it can make a choice that could undo a lifetime of choices. Instead it chooses to hide out in the ego” (x).

That is, “hiding out in the ego” is equivalent to maintaining the status quo—no radical break from one’s past but rather maintaining the founding premises and the details derived from them. With liminality on the other hand, one realizes that one’s fundamental premise can change in a moment. This was the oft-quoted sentiment after 9/11. It appears that many Americans stepped into a new world for a blinding moment and then spent the next few months trying to scramble back to the old one. Something like this happens with individual psychological development as well. One glimpses the possibility of stepping into a new world and also resists that possibility. These competing forces are experienced intensely as one enters a transitional zone with the possibility of exiting on a different existential plane.

Those forces can feel like they are tearing the individual apart when compared to the experience of dwelling within a specific developmental stage where one's limits are accepted, possibly even cherished as the "taken-for-granted". At an even deeper level of analysis Szokolczai (2009) claimed that liminal individuals are often not able to act rationally "because the structure on which 'objective' rationality was based has disappeared". Our conjecture is that the ur-structure is the boundary that separates the "me" from the "not-me"—my self from the other, the subject from the object. During a transition from one stage to the next (a transition that in no way is guaranteed) that boundary is dissolved. This results in the disappearance of the anchored vantage point that makes rationality possible.

Sass and Parnas (2003) give an account of a schizophrenic's dilemma, which might well also describe a "normal" individual passing through the liminal zone. They will be quoted at length for the richness of description that they offer:

Normal self affection is a condition for the experience of appetite, vital energy, and point of orientation: it is what grounds human motivation and organizes our experiential world in accordance with needs and wishes, thereby giving objects "affordances" (Gibson 1986)—their significance for us as obstacles, tools, objects of desire, and the like. Although clearly associated with a sense of energy, vitality, and the capacity for pleasure, self-affection is something more basic: a matter of "mattering"—of constituting a lived point of orientation and the correlated pattern of meanings that make for a coherent and significant world. In the absence of this vital self-affection and the lines of orientation it establishes, the structured nature of the worlds of both thought and perception will be altered or even dissolved, for then there can no longer be any...*reason for attention to be directed outward toward the world rather than inward toward one's own body or processes of thinking.* (Sass and Parnas, 2003: 436, emphasis added)

Their thought is very rich, very dense. Let us unpack it to reveal the meanings we detect. We begin with the term "self affection". Self affection is equivalent to dwelling within and living from one's prereflective self. If this is the case, then one's behaviour is not calculated but spontaneous. With the prereflective as our habitus we are aware (not self-conscious) of our "appetites" and they in turn point to those aspects of our environment that might satisfy those appetites. We don't have to deduce our appetite reflectively—"let's see, it is 7:00 p.m. so I must be hungry and I should have something to eat". No, the point of orientation comes into being prereflectively. And simultaneously a coherent and significant world is constituted—"what's in my fridge?" That is, the prereflective composes both a self and a world—a set of appetites and an environment that can provide satisfaction. One's commitment polarizes a world that highlights those things, which can serve one's ends.

However, the most telling part of the Sass and Parnas (2003) quotation is their comment that the absence of self-affection, the structured nature of both thought and perception will be altered or even dissolved. That is to say that if we don't dwell within and live from the prereflective, then both our sense of self and world will become fluid and unstable. One's

perception, or one's sensibility begins to shift and morph without any apparent cause. This almost echoes Szakolczai's (2009) claim that liminal individuals are often not able to act rationally "because the structure on which 'objective' rationality was based has disappeared". There is something absurd in this for it seems to imply that by opting to live in one's reflective mind—in the hope that by doing so, one will become more objective—one loses the inherent stability of the prereflective self. Although one *might* be able to consider alternative viewpoints with no predispositions or biases, one would neither have criteria by which to choose nor the affirmative impulse to enact one's choice.

We are very aware that many of the descriptions above, while pertaining to individuals, seem to also fit cultural collectives during a time of liquid modernity. Bauman (2000) claims that our institutions don't have time to solidify and therefore can not be employed as a framework to guide our behaviour. We suggest that institutions are for the collective what the prereflective is for the individual. That is, each offer a set of reliable reference points that serve to organize either individual or social behaviours. How are these two domains—the individual prereflective and the cultural collective—related? *Social institutions, traditions, customs, and social imaginaries are terms given to collective forms that migrate inward to structure the prereflective of its individual members.* However, the pace of change during our era is so rapid, that by the time these forms are internalized they are no longer present in the world. Beck (in Beck and Willms, 2003) pointed out that lacking adequate terms or symbols to make sense of liquid modernity we instead employ "zombie categories". These are concepts that still live in the word but no longer live in the flesh. For example, the modern sexual categories of heterosexual as normative and homosexuality as pathological—and both as fixed rather than changeable—have been problematized. Being problematized, those "naturalized" categories began to mutate or morph. First, homosexuality was re-labelled as sexual preference rather than sexual perversion. Later, a hybrid category was sometimes invoked: "bi-sexuality". Then—at least in popular culture—the original categories were re-named: "straight" and "gay". More currently, Giddens (1990) has coined the term "plastic sexuality" to include sexual preferences that are changeable and fluid over an individual's lifetime. Thus, the modern categories, hetero- and homosexuality, which seemed to exclude ambiguity, are being contested by the postmodern category of plastic sexuality.

This brief genealogy exemplifies the transition from naturalized, to zombie, to new, categories. It seems that when we let go of our old way of categorizing we enter a liminal zone where the manner in which we formerly organized experience has dis-integrated and we're forced to confront the world as it is. We suggest that with this shift, there is a correlated diminishment of one's sense of autonomy and agency. The experience of autonomy largely depends on having developed an "interior" reflective space in which one can consider hypothetical alternatives. Agency is exercised when one enacts the alternative that one has freely chosen. Lacking such a space we often find ourselves choosing between being defensively reactive or existentially creative<sup>8</sup>. As anyone who has experienced culture shock soon realizes, when one confronts strangeness everywhere, one's much vaunted sense of autonomy disappears. We can attempt to impose old categories but our sensibility, our perceptions, will be at cross-purposes with those categories.

My advice to clients who have entered a liminal zone is to relax and attend to their circumstances. “Forget analysis and reflection and opt instead for awareness”, I suggest. I instruct them to register and collect experiences, which will begin to form into organized patterns spontaneously.

Eventually, people go one step beyond this implicit form making and recognition. We schematize, routinize, and perhaps even develop an icon (symbol) for these lived through patterns. With these freshly minted symbols we might be able to communicate with each other in ways that make sense once more. For that reason, I am grateful to Bauman (2000) as well as Beck and Willms (2003) for generating symbolic descriptions that apply to the time in which we actually live. They are not content to “explain” postmodern realities by utilizing zombie categories.

### *The Perils of Unmediated Contact*

At the beginning of this paper we asked how critique and reflection might be constitutive of modernity. During its writing we came to the provisional conclusion that critique and reflection produced a disenchanted world. And, further that disenchantment is closely related to—or even the result of—prereflective disengagement. As described by James (1982), such a world seemed inert, dead, and unreachable. By opting to dwell mostly in our reflective, conceptual minds, we’ve attenuated our contact with the actual world. This has resulted in a world as picture, that is, world as representation. A denatured human is a correlate of a disenchanted world. In order to be a robust person, one has to be in the world. As Sass and Parnas (2003) point out,

If a person ceases to be interested in what lies out there in the world, or desists from adopting an active, exploratory posture, then gradually the person’s focus of attention, and with it the tendrils of selfhood, may pull backward. (432, emphasis added)

Instead, one opts for working within the cocoon of representation and concept. While this might provide the illusion of certainty as well as a heightened sense of autonomy, it also diminishes one’s ability to deal with the emergent. The emergent needs to be encountered existentially rather than categorically.

When a direct encounter with the actual world occurs however, it can be an awe inspiring, and occasionally terror provoking, experience. The following accounts describe that experience. Earlier we cited an experiment by Deikman (1966) where his participants were instructed to attend to a blue vase for half hour durations over 10 trials. As we already reported, one participant felt like she was losing her sense of self as a separate identity. Another participant experienced objects losing their defining boundaries.

[I]t all dissolved into a bundle of something which had ... a great deal of energy to it but which doesn’t form into anything but it only feels like a force. (Deikman, 1966: 84)

He is describing the loss of form that normally is spontaneously organized by one’s sedimented prereflective. That is, one’s sedimented prereflective provides one with a

ready-made set of meanings prior to any reflective meaning making. The participant above, however, was experiencing the world without that organizing filter. Compare his description to the one that Sartre (1964) attributes to his protagonist, Roquentin, in *Nausea*. His character, while sitting on a park bench and being overwhelmed by his perception of a tree's root, exclaims,

Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of "existence". I was like the others.... I said, like them, 'The ocean is green; that white speck up there is a seagull,' but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an 'existing seagull.'

... And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, the root was kneaded into existence....the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. (Sartre, 1964: 127, emphasis added)

Roquentin had been catapulted out of his conceptual mind. The veneer of concepts had dissolved, exposing the brute materiality of existence. Because he was living from the prereflective, he could only experience, and not explain, the root. Any explanation would operate as a conceptual screen between the object (the soft, monstrous mass) and the subject, Roquentin. Lacking that screen, the pure otherness of the object, compelled his attention. He exclaims,

I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. (Sartre, 1964: 127)

The significance of things and their meaning is a kind of an "add-on". The experience that Sartre (1964) describes is evoked even more vividly in the *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl* (Sechehaye, 1970). The writer looks at various objects in her room

[Objects] filled me with terror. When, for example, I looked at a chair or a jug, I thought not of their use or function—a jug not as something to hold water and milk, a chair as not something to sit in—but as having lost their names, their functions and meanings; they became "things" and began to take on life, to exist.... To conquer my fear I looked away.... I attempted to escape their hold by calling out their names. I said, "chair, jug, table, it is a chair." But the word echoed hollowly, deprived of all meaning; it had left the object, was divorced from it, so much so that on one hand it was living, mocking thing, on the other, a name, robbed of sense, an envelope emptied of content. Nor was I able to bring the two together, but stood rooted there before them, filled with fear and impotence. (Sechehaye, 1970: 40–41, emphasis added)

Renee attempted to escape the grip of objects by invoking the screen of their names. If the names interceded between her and the objects, then perhaps her identity and autonomy would be returned to her.

Her description of the separation of meaning from their objects parallels the modern linguistic turn that distinguishes or separates a sign from its referent. It seems that one of the effects of reflective analysis is the transformation of language from a medium of communication into an object or thing in itself. The disintegrating power of reflective analysis did not stop there but rather continued on, breaking down the sign into its constituent parts of signifier and signified. These linguistic developments were intellectual and incremental in nature whereas Renee's experience was more existential and sudden. We suggest that both the individual cases, described above, and the linguistic turn in philosophy, demonstrate the effects when "the tendrils of selfhood ... pull backward". (Sass and Parnas, 2003, 432)

With that "pull backward", meaning, like Sartre's (1964) veneer, is peeled away from existence. Without meaning we simply don't know how to carry on. Instead we feel disoriented and frightened. No wonder we call for a meaning to be inscribed on the surface of reality ... anything that could simultaneously function as both a screen blocking, and a map revealing, reality.

### *Conclusion*

We set out two positions: first, the reflective position that enables critique but produces both a disenchanted world and a denatured self and, second, an unmediated prereflective in which the world overwhelms with its mysterious presence. The first position suggests how critique and reflection might be constitutive of modernity. The second position might be a sign that western culture is caught up in a liminal process. Occupying the first position, we rely on zombie categories, which purport to explain our existence while being blind to emergent conditions. With the second, we are explorers that have arrived in a new country without a map. We suggest that the best way to navigate this turbulent, in-between time is with awareness rather than reflective analysis. By attending to our lived experience we can begin to collect and identify certain repetitious patterns that can eventually become the basis for new categories for making our experience communicable.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The scientific method attempts to ignore the relationship between the subject and the object in order to get a “pure” view of the object. Various connections between events are filled by an idealized observer who enlists the “view from nowhere”.

<sup>2</sup> Not only was abstraction valued over personal belief but also over desire, need, and appetite. That is, the relationship between the living person and their immediate environment was not seen as a legitimate domain for scientific exploration.

<sup>3</sup> We make a distinction between prereflective *experience* and reflective *meaning*. To oversimplify: the former is holistic and intuitive whereas the latter is linear and consciously constructed. Those meanings will be elaborated as the article proceeds.

<sup>4</sup> In that way, it becomes possible to dwell within a semantic or symbolic landscape rather than a material landscape. This disengagement from our actual circumstance, in favor of a conceptual representation, is the precursor for further, more sophisticated acts of reflection.

<sup>5</sup> This is the term employed by Sass (2003). He argues that schizophrenia is “fundamentally a self-disorder or ipseity disturbance (*ipse* is Latin for “self” or “itself”) that is characterized by complementary distortions of the act of awareness: hyperreflexivity and diminished self-affection” (427).

<sup>6</sup> This is based on the first author’s experience with clients with panic disorder.

<sup>7</sup> “Liminal”, *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. OED Online Oxford University Press..

<sup>8</sup> Existential freedom is a radical freedom that could potentially overturn a lifetime of previous decisions. Contrast this with the *experience* of autonomy that is more often of a less radical nature. Here one confronts a range of choices that has been severely constrained by one’s previous choices. Consequently the feeling of risk is greatly attenuated. It is a more superficial, and a less foundational, decision.

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