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978-0-521-72965-9 - Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness

Philippe Rochat

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OTHERS IN MIND

Why are we so prone to guilt and embarrassment? Why do we care so much about how others see us, about our reputation? What are the origins of such afflictions? It is because we are members of a species that evolved the unique propensity to reflect upon themselves as the object of thoughts, an object of thoughts that is potentially evaluated by others. But, Philippe Rochat's argument goes, this propensity comes from a basic fear: the fear of rejection, of being socially "banned" and ostracized. *Others in Mind* is about self-consciousness, how it originates and how it shapes our lives. Self-consciousness is arguably the most important and revealing of all psychological problems.

Philippe Rochat is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Emory University in Atlanta. Born and raised in Geneva, Switzerland, he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Geneva, where he was trained in psychology by Jean Piaget and his close collaborators. The author of *The Infant's World* (2001), Rochat is currently researching the emergence of a moral sense during the preschool years in children all over the world growing up in highly contrasted cultural environments and socioeconomic circumstances.

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FOREWORD

JÉRÔME BRUNER

This is an astonishing book, astonishing both in its range and in what it seeks to make clear. Its central concern is with the nature and origins of selfhood, a distinctively human phenomenon. Its rather contrarian view is that Selfhood emerges as a product of inevitable uncertainties about our acceptance by the larger group or, more broadly, as a product of our doubts about how Others see us. Self, in a word, is then a joint project, *Cogitamus, ergo sum*, rather than the simplex Cartesian *Cogito, ergo sum*. Selfhood is not just a product of inner processes but it expresses the outcome of real or imagined exchanges with Others.

This is a book of astonishing breadth, for Philippe Rochat explores not only different forms of self-awareness, but also the varied settings in which such self-awareness may be evoked. And in the process he leans upon evidence from his own well-known experimental studies of young children, evidence from linguistic theory itself, and evidence from comparative cultural studies of peoples around the world. For him, the evidence is overwhelmingly, “Without others, there is no self-consciousness.”

Indeed, it is this other-related nature of self-awareness, with its accompanying fear of rejection, that creates the compelling dynamic of shame that is so much a feature of human awareness. It seems an odd way of putting it, but for Rochat selfhood is as much if not more a human distress maker as a distress dispeller (as it is in Freudian thinking). For him, shame and personal distress are, as it were, inherent in the way we perceive and evaluate our lives. Yet, while this may seem a dark view of the human condition, it is one that leads us to see the human effort to avoid shame and humiliation in a broader, less self-condemnatory way.

Indeed, though this book is strikingly modern, even postmodern, it reflects some ancient philosophical themes, two in particular. The first of these (in the author’s words) is that “without others we are nothing.”

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And the second is that what we think and feel is driven by a fear of being rejected by others. Ancient indeed, for both figure in Greek drama, as in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. Yet persistently modern as well, as in post-Vichy France, with Sartre's classic "Hell is the Others." It is admirable how Philippe Rochat revisits these ancient concepts in their modern setting(s) and makes us aware again of their inevitability.

Rochat is most involved with the subjective consequences of our forever "figuring out" what the other fellow has concluded about us. And our conception of ourselves, our selfhood, derives from this figuring out. We do not want to be found too wanting, and if we feel that others find us so, we suffer by a self-imposed reduction in self-pride or self-assurance. In fact, we deal with the balancing act imposed by making up tales to reveal how we "truly" are, and why we need not feel so ashamed. Selfhood, indeed, is a compromise between self-blame and self-praise – the two usually balanced by a narrative that includes them both.

We are all enormously in Philippe Rochat's debt for his having reopened many of these issues – and I choose my words with care, for it is a reopening that we are witnessing. What is interesting to contemplate is where we go from here. Is it a sign of our time that we choose, in these times of trouble, to create Selfhood out of our modern sense of failure to live up to expectations? Where next?

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PREFACE

In writing this book, I had in mind anybody interested and sensitive to the question of self-consciousness, how it originates and how it shapes our lives, arguably the most important and revealing of all psychological problems. Why are we so prone to guilt and embarrassment? Why do we care so much about how others see us, about our reputation? What are the origins of such afflictions?

My answer to these questions is that it is because we are members of a species that evolved the unique propensity to reflect upon themselves as object of thoughts, an object of thoughts that is potentially evaluated by others. I argue that this propensity comes from a basic fear: the fear of rejection, of being socially “banned” and ostracized.

From this simple premise, I propose to look at young children and their development, but also at many other intriguing human propensities, to see what they have to tell us about the social origins and nature of human self-consciousness.

I invite the reader to this exploration, an exploration that I value more than just another academic foray. It is an invitation for the exploration of what it means to be human, alive in this world, and how we construe our being in relation to others.

This book is meant to be more than an academic concoction for the few initiated specialists. Based on empirical observations, primarily developmental observations of children, it is a book of ideas guided by strong existential intuitions regarding the human condition. At the core of these intuitions, there is the idea that human psychic life is predominantly determined by what we imagine others perceive of us.

In Sartre’s grim terms: “Hell is the Others.” But paradoxically, without others we would simply not be, and there would not be any possible paradise. The “good life” is not a solitary, solipsistic existence. We exist

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and gauge the worth of our existence primarily through the eyes of others. More importantly, others also determine whether *I* am right to feel safe, in particular, safe from being rejected by them.

Feeling safe is part of the “good life,” and it is inseparable from the feeling of being affiliated. My argument is that it all depends on the recognition and acknowledgment of self by others.

There are many people who have been instrumental to this project: Britt Berg for her diligent editing of a first rough draft of the manuscript; all my students for stimulating discussions before and during this long project, particularly Meghan Meyer and all my student collaborators at the Emory Infant Laboratory; not to forget my old friend Michel Heller for his constant intellectual jolts and inspiring discussions, and Dan Zahavi for his generous last minute philosophical scrutiny. I express my gratitude to Jerome Bruner, one of my heroes, for the privilege of his friendship, his support over the years, and his legendary enthusiasm and to George Downing for his careful reading and generous comments on a first version of the manuscript. But I am particularly indebted to my Carioca friends Claudia Passos-Ferreira and Pedro Salem of the free spirited, trustful, wild, and warm weekly “séminaire sauvage” in Paris, café de l’Ecole Militaire, during the sweet 2004–5 year. This is especially for you, “Princesse” Claudia and my friend Pedro, for your intelligence, but more importantly, for your warmth, encouragement, and enthusiasm. I learned a lot from you; thank you.

Finally, I express my gratitude to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for their 2006–7 fellowship that gave me the freedom to finish this book and start yet another one on the origins of the sense of ownership and entitlement. Thank you for the great privilege and opportunity.

Atlanta, March 2008