

Philosophy that is Mindful

Philip McShane, S. J.

At the end of her article in the May ROSC, Mary Kenny expressed her belief in the root importance of linguistic meaning for self-discovery – “a fundamental clue to the mystery of who I am.” She would not claim, no more than I would, to have plumbed that significance. Indeed to plumb the significance of linguistic regionalisation is part of the larger challenge of our century: to face both solitarily and communally the question, Who am I? in a new mode. Nor is it a small part, as sociologist and students of the psychology of language are slowly discovering. As Bernard Lonergan notes, in the chapter on Meaning in his forthcoming *Method in Theology*, linguistic meaning is a uniquely sharp focusing of conscious intentionality, orientating the person in his or her world in a necessarily specific manner. Moreover, that orientation will have the contours of the language’s history, and it is interesting here to note the feebleness of arguments which point to lack of development in these past centuries of the Irish language. For, these past centuries have not been centuries of novel psychic enrichment in the objectifications of human meaning, one of which is language. Vocabulary undoubtedly has increased in the used languages of the world of scientific and industrial revolution, but this increase was due more to the pressures of physics than to the pulsing of the heart of man. So it is that not only is there a question of the revival of the Irish language: there is a question of the revival of the English language. There is the ques-

tion of the revival of man and his objectification in words and stone and colour and dance, and that revival pivots on the adequate raising of the question, Who am I?

What I have sought to stress all along in this series of articles are the dimensions of that question, the novelty of the pursuit of the answer, the remoteness of the answer. I must note in passing that I have avoided raising that question explicitly to the dimensions of ultimate concern here (Cf. my effort in the second chapter of *Music That is Soundless*), but it is relevant to remark that religion is no exception to the unbalance: what should pivot on a Mystery-laden acceptance of being loved by God has become something less than a divine economy, and its dulled liturgy is cramped by the same myth of instant literal communication that haunts all our media. The myth is that the essence of man – or of God – can be trapped in a television interview or a page of print. So it is that this print, too, is haunted even as it is directed to stressing its own deficiency. And to exorcize it is no small task – it is a matter of a reorientation of a people. That reorientation is of such dimensions that it will not be the achievement of our generation. But our task is to ensure that it be a possible achievement of the next. If we, culture-cramped, can only feebly raise the question, Who am I? still we should strive to bring that question adequately to birth in younger minds. What is called for is a transformation of education, which is as sick as any other component of contemporary culture. Central to that transformation, as I have noted regularly, is a methodological reflection pivoting on adequate self-attention. So, for instance, philosophy in school or in university is not a question of introducing the

dialogues of Plato or the doubts of Descartes, but of introducing the existential question, Who am I? in an adequate transcultural and cultural manner, and in a new mode.

It is only in so far as the question is thus raised educationally that the possibilities of human progress within technopolis can be realised. I would emphasise that this last point should be seen as positive. Many writers on the subject stress the negative aspects of the accelerating technology. But human hope and wider understanding demand that we see in it not a total constraint on man, but a challenge to transform radically human science and human culture. The focal direction of that transformation I will endeavour to indicate more fully in the two concluding articles of this series. I note here that it centres on the need to raise the basic human question, Who am I? in a mode that is deeply novel. David Riesman wrote at the end of his book, *The Lonely Crowd*: “If the other-directed people should discover how much needless work they do, discover that their own thoughts and their own lives are quite as interesting as other people’s, that indeed, they no more assuage their loneliness in crowds of peers than one can assuage one’s thirst by drinking sea water, then we might expect them to become more attentive to their own feelings and aspirations.” But Riesman has no serious glimpse of the modality of that attention that is necessary and possible, nor does he advert to the cultural discontinuity involved in it. So it is that his book ends without an answer, because he is trapped with our generation in the deficiency of his own mode of asking the question, Who am I?