

Alexandru Dragomir's Quest for Identity

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Abstract

This article is a hermeneutic attempt to think through some of Alexandru Dragomir's philosophical fragments that focus on the problem of identity. To this purpose, the first part examines Dragomir's existential strategy in asserting the pre-eminence of the *need for identity* in his analysis of the mirror, as well as in his reinterpretation of the myth of Narcissus. The second part tackles the inner configuration of Dragomir's *ownness-strangeness dialectic* along with the function it holds in his understanding of philosophy as a perpetual self-questioning. The final section addresses Dragomir's confrontation with the metaphysical tradition regarding the nature of individual *uniqueness*.

Keywords: Alexandru Dragomir, Romainan philosopher, Martin Heidegger, ontology of the self, autology, existential identity

Alexandru Dragomir's¹ interest in the problem of identity can be traced in his writings as early as February 1945, in an article called *On Mirror*². As far as we know, this article and a Romanian co-translation with Walter Biemel of Heidegger's 1929 conference *What is Metaphysics?* are the only texts Dragomir ever wrote for publishing. In this brief text Dragomir argues that the mirror functions in most cases as *a place of meeting* between ourselves and our image, thus providing us with the occasion to realise how the others see us. Glancing in the mirror, we try to see ourselves through the eyes of strangers, we look for our "alienness" in order to critically evaluate our guise and eventually to correct any irregularities.

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The mirror is typically placed near the exit, hence, we can check our appearance before entering the public space. As scrutiny occurs at a fast pace, the mirror satisfies a purely functional role and answers to our need to integrate in society. Besides this *external attitude*, Dragomir coins a different type of relation to the mirror: *an inner attitude*, a frantic search for our “ownness”. In this case, the mirror transcends its purpose as a place of meeting and becomes *a place of conversation*. The gaze evolves into existential scrutiny as the orientation is no longer objective, but dependent on everything that we are.

The drive to grasp our image, to be in a state of *eye to eye with ourselves*, indicates the profound urge to find an expression to our ego, persona and identity. For Dragomir, the myth of Narcissus illustrates the essence of the mirror and manifests a *limit situation* involving the inner attitude. The mystery of the mirror and its power of attraction rests on the assumption that it can reveal something of the self's inner side, that it can *objectify the subject*³. Narcissus considers the contemplation of himself in the mirror as an act of most intimate knowledge, and is charmed by the possibility of an immediate connection with his own persona. After several extended attempts, Narcissus understands the mirror's illusion, he realises the impossibility of a total assimilation between the individual and his expression. In the end, yearning for a finality of his efforts, Narcissus chooses an absurd unification, gently closing the distance that separates him from his reflection in the water, to the point of vanishing.

Contrary to the main versions of the myth of Narcissus, which tend to focus either on the aesthetic problem regarding the limits of beauty, either on the ethical dilemma of a misplaced affect, Dragomir gives it an ontological interpretation, thus saving the dignity of its character. The demise of Narcissus does not originate in his sublime beauty nor in his misplaced love for himself but in the dramatic endeavour to satisfy the basic human need of finding oneself, in an improper and misleading milieu of the mirror. Reflecting our external image, the mirror can function as a conversation starter as well as it initiates a return to the self. However, it also plays with our sense of curiosity and wonder (lat. *miro*) in

creating the illusion that our spirit can take a tangible form, yet, ultimately, the mirror cannot fulfil our *existential thirst* for identity. Narcissus's mistake consists in the aspiration to find an aesthetic solution to an existential need for self-consciousness and in the obstinacy to follow this path to the end. By exemplifying the extreme conditions in which the search for identity can lead to self-negation, Dragomir's elucidation of the myth brings forth the fundamental urgency to find our selfhood. The orientation towards the self implies all together a double intentionality: a recognition of our *ownness*, the part of ourselves that establishes our most basic familiarity, and a grasping of our *strangeness*, the previously hidden part that still belongs to us. The cardinal necessity for identity seems to be, in Dragomir's view, the inherent consequence of the permanent tension generated by the dialectic movement between the recognition of our *ownness* and the assimilation of our *strangeness*.

Alexandru Dragomir offers a more detailed reflection on the problem of identity in relation to the ownness-strangeness dialectic in a fragment named *The Banal Strangenesses of Mankind*⁴. The fact that "life goes on by itself" represents a striking triviality, certainly not worthy of any attention. However, if one pauses to analyse it, its uncanny meaning begins to reveal itself. "That for which I try to give evidence is the intimate strangeness that resides in me, which is *my life*. My life cannot be hurried, stopped, or delayed. My life, the basic fact of my ownness, is also something strange to me, which means I am fundamentally split, always having to follow the stranger that lies in myself (*daß ich immer mitgehen muß*)."
(Dragomir 2005, 107) We are not the origin of our life, we cannot change its essence, thus life contains, in a sense, an independent passage or motion that exceeds our power. Of course, it stands in our power to put an end to it, as Narcissus does, but the mere negation cannot change the essence.

At this point, one could wonder about the meaning of the "I" implied by "my life". Dragomir states that no matter how we understand the self (soul, persona, ego, subject or conscience), even if we reduce the metaphysical entanglement surrounding it to a simple *point*, everything that happens in life is *a priori*

related to *the fact of the point of reference*. In other words, the relational dimension of the self remains given in spite of abstracting the content meaning. *The point of reference* signifies the *non-spatial centre* toward which every single thing is orientated. "Everything comes to me and leaves from me, and I cannot make it otherwise, not even in a dream." (Dragomir 2005, 205) In addition, any intention to comprehend the primal self-relation as a sentiment, sensation or consciousness fails on the count of it being their condition of possibility.

According to Dragomir there is a third layer, that of *banal strangenesses* which involve our presence in the world. The orientation towards the self implies identity, while the orientation towards the world implies alterity. Besides the *self-relation*, we are similarly situated in a *world-relation* that is also given and independent of our will or power. The world follows its own course, obeys its own laws and remains indifferent to our presence. Utterly overwhelmed by the world, we take part in it and are at the mercy of its power. Nevertheless, the self stands fundamentally open to the world, it is free to perceive and understand it. The difference between the two lies in the fact that the understanding is not given, but involves effort and choice. The *aporetic strangeness* of the fact that we simultaneously are an insignificant part of the world and something that encircles the entire world through understanding constitutes our "*ex-centricity* in the world" (Dragomir 2005, 117).

The merge between *the point or reference* and the *strangenesses of life* always takes place in *the fact of living itself* and therefore the content meaning of the self takes the expression of the way we live, while our identity depends of the expressions we give to this relation: self-knowledge (*γνώθι σεαυτόν*), self-contemplation, self-preoccupation (*ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ*), self-interrogation (Augustine: *Mihi quaestio factus sum*, Heidegger: *Selbstfrage*), self-sufficiency (*αὐτάρκεια*), self-deceiving, self-forgetting, self-love (*φιλαυτία*), etc. The quest for the self depends on the answer given to the fundamental question: *how should one live the life that has been given?* Dragomir believes that by asking this question we stand in the

openness of our original freedom, a space where the concern for the meaning of life appears.

“Firstly, the original freedom is not an act of the will, but one of meaning. Of course, we have no clue what “meaning” is, even less the meaning of life. It is enough to know that “meaning” signifies anything whatsoever, like the act of distinguishing my thoughts. For example, in our case, meaning signifies advancing the banality that *life is lived* to the status of a problem. The fact that I live my life is primary. Thus, the relation between the permanent going that constitutes the life independent of «me» and the orientation to myself, in the sense of the life given to me, in and through which I am what I am, is also primary. But then again, if I strive to advance my life to the status of problem, instead of living by chance and bringing into play my minimal freedoms, then the horizon of my original freedom and the prospect of the meaning of my life, appear.” (Dragomir 2005, 110-111)

This fragment illustrates how Dragomir adapts the Socratic imperative of self-questioning to his Hegelian inspired *ownness-strangeness* dialectic and makes use of it in a post-Heideggerian existential scenario. It is in this context that Dragomir shows that the limits of our freedom can be found exclusively in confrontation with our given strangenesses which in a sense constitute “the trap we live in⁵”. It is the constant activity of understanding *the trap we live in* that bears the name of philosophy.

In a text named *On Uniqueness*⁶, Alexandru Dragomir takes another path to examining the problem of identity, one that gets him closer to the metaphysical tradition but not further from his belief that “to philosophize means thinking about the facts known to everyone.” (Dragomir 2010, 134) Dragomir observes that there are many types of *individual uniqueness*: some of them are innate (our prints) some change with age (our way of walking) or with disposition (our voice) etc. Each individual is unique in a multitude of ways. But a question concerning *the grounding uniqueness* arises against this unsettling plurality. At this point, the metaphysical terminology involving *uniqueness* requires clarification. The *individual* has only an indicating sense; the *specific* designates the species, not the individual; the *proper* (lat. *proprium*) refers to the *common* elements belonging to the genus and the species, not to the individual. Thus, the usual language of *uniqueness*

emphasizes the common elements of a class, a direction assignable to the Platonic and Aristotelian paradigm that established *uniqueness as essence*. For Aristotle, besides the essential *uniqueness* of the *genus* or the *species*, there is only a numerical unicity (κατ' ἀριθμὸν ἐστὶν ἓν, τὰ δὲ κατ' εἶδος, τὰ δὲ κατὰ γένος. *Met.* 5.1016b), that also retains only an indicating sense.

“According to Plato, following the line of thought of the *essence* leads us to the last species, and not to the individual, which is *alogos* (*Philebos* 16 b-d). But then, my *uniqueness* (*meine Einmaligkeit*), my proper self is not essential but accidental in nature. It can only be determined from outside, by applying of the space-time «forms». The existence in itself is overlooked and the only issue that remains is the essence (*ousia*), the pure forms etc. However, the *uniqueness* needs to be fundamentally tied to the existence. Heidegger solved the matter by distinguishing between *beings* (*Seiendes*) and *being* (*Sein*), but he took these things too easily (*er hat es sich leicht gemacht*).” (Dragomir 2005, 244)

In search for a *grounding uniqueness*, Dragomir agrees with Heidegger's solution to take the existence as a starting point. The banality that each person has its own singular manifestation and reality could be translated as the *immediateness of each individual with itself*. Dragomir believes that our immediateness, the fundamental *datum* of our existence, was not properly unfolded due to its aporetic nature, although it has been frequently called into question in the history of metaphysics, for example in Augustine's famous question: “What is closer to me than myself?” (“Quid antem propinquius meipso mihi?” *Confessions* X, 16) or in Heidegger's understanding of *mineness* (*Jemeinigkeit*). According to Dragomir, at the same time and respect, the *uniqueness of oneself for oneself* is *given, evident, immediate* and *continuous* for oneself, but also *inexpressible, irreducible to a concept, logically inaccessible* and *inscrutable* in itself. As long as we accept the perspective that each human being is unique in itself and for itself, we recognise a common trait of the uniqueness, but this commonality refers strictly to the class, not the content of the uniqueness itself. The *uniqueness of oneself for oneself* can only be indicated as a matter of existence, as we cannot actually exceed the *existential structure* and the others cannot pervade.

The fundamental *uniqueness* makes the basic distinction between the self and everything else that “stands outside” possible (*the uniqueness of oneself for the others*, our ownness, our strangeness, the alterity, the world) and is thus the core structure of our identity. Furthermore, Dragomir points out a side of our existential uniqueness that can be recognized and identified only from an external point of view, but remains inaccessible to us: a *uniqueness of oneself for the others*.

“This particular uniqueness ex-poses me in such a way that the other can see me, can hear me, and so on, but I cannot. The others know my individual specificity, but I do not. I could hardly recognize my voice if I heard it in a recording; my accidental reflection in a mirror surprises me; I am the only one who does not know the way I walk, the way I talk, even though all of these are accessible to the others.” (Dragomir 2005, 192)

The reason behind our impossibility to obtain an understanding of our *uniqueness for others* lies in the fact that there is no “outside” or a *meta* point from where we can access and get to know ourselves. Dragomir notices our enigmatic condition of owning two different *uniquenesses* and stops to ask about their possible relation, but provides no answer. In this ontological analysis Dragomir questions the underlying relationship between *uniqueness* and *commonness*, a relationship that in a sense grounds each area of the self and of the entire mankind. In his assessment, our identity configures itself in the permanent confrontation with the dialectic structures that make up our life: *uniqueness* and *commonness*, existence and essence, ownness and strangeness.

From an ontological standpoint, Alexandru Dragomir could be classified as an *autologist*, a thinker, belonging to the metaphysical tradition⁷, preoccupied with the fundamental structures we find ourselves. As a proper autologist, Dragomir writes only for himself and thinks only for himself, being totally disengaged from any cultural life⁸ that could limit his freedom. Having spent most of his adult life in a totalitarian society, Dragomir practices philosophy as a secret individual activity and aims to uncover his existential situation through a way of life based on self-questioning. As a first consequence, his philosophy always starts from that which is closest to us but

usually overlooked: our *banalities*. Secondly, Dragomir cultivates unrestricted kinship with the philosophical tradition, his fragments being the result of “a dialogue with the great dead” (Pleșu 2004, 68): Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Schelling and Heidegger. Thirdly, an exclusively private philosophy disregards the category of originality that belongs to the cultural and academic. Hence, there is more to be gained from thinking through the content of Dragomir's fragments than from a genealogical tracing of their origins. Alexandru Dragomir epitomizes an authentic Narcissus of the philosophy, an autologist detached from culture, driven by an existential need for identity, who takes great liberties with the means of the metaphysical tradition in order to reflect on the self. The difference consists in the fact that Dragomir's traces remain to be thought and understood, while Narcissus's remain to be seen and smelled.

NOTES

¹ The main philosophical biography of Alexandru Dragomir was written by Gabriel Liiceanu (2004, 17-65). See also: Pleșu (2004, 65-73), Patapievici (2004, 73-79), Ciomoș (2004, 79-91), Bondor (2006, 116-129), Ciocan (2007, 63-79), Partenie (2004, 91-102), Partenie (2012-2013, 455-463), Ferencz-Flatz (2017, 45-55).

² *On Mirror* was published in *Five departures from present. Phenomenological exercises* (Dragomir 2005a, 13-20). See also the French translation (Dragomir 2005b).

³ An observation made by Mircea Vulcănescu (1904-1952) (Dragomir 2005a, 18).

⁴ *The Banal Strangenesses of Mankind* was published in Dragomir (2005a, 106-120). See also Dragomir (2005c).

⁵ “It is for this reason that you cannot live without doing philosophy. In a way, we can live without thinking about the infinite, but we cannot live without thinking about our trap. For the simple reason that we live in it. Philosophy is thinking about the trap in which we live. I agree, of course, that there are many ways out of this trap; the principal escape routes are religion, philosophy, science and art. In the case of philosophy, I escape from the trap exactly to the extent that I want to *understand* it. You can, of course, live in this trap content that «they» give you warmth and food, I mean without feeling any need for philosophy. But for me that is not a life that I can choose. No! I want to understand my world. And this is called doing philosophy.” (Dragomir 2004b, 181).

⁶ *On Uniqueness* was published in Dragomir (2005a, 190-209). See also the French translation (Dragomir 2004, 121-135).

⁷ “Philosophy (Metaphysics) has been my home for the past 70 years.” (Dragomir 2008b, 182).

⁸ “The toil of self-understanding does not belong to the cultural dimension.” (Dragomir 2008a, 37).

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