

Inward Discourse and Moral Philosophy: the Case of the Stoic Soliloquy

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In this paper, I would like to articulate a conception that gives inward discourse a crucial role in moral control. I will deal mainly with the philosophy of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713)—the author of *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, who was responsible for reviving Roman stoicism at the beginning of the 18th century and is also known as a founder of modern philosophical aesthetics¹.

In the first part, I set out briefly three features of the use of the notion of self-discourse or “soliloquy” in the European early modern age: 1. Soliloquy is viewed as a sign of melancholy. 2. It is employed as a dramatic device on the scene. 3. It is a technique in religious training.

In the second part, I try to show that Shaftesbury combines those traditional aspects and goes farther, since he gives soliloquy a major role in the development of practical rationality, of which he finds a paradigm in the Roman Stoics. In so doing, Shaftesbury suggests that the importance of self-discourse goes beyond the cultural aspects that I underline in the first part of the paper. I will argue that, for Shaftesbury, soliloquy is of great significance for our understanding of the authority of reason in ethical matters and that it is closely connected with moral rationalism, which is the core of the Stoic doctrine.

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Talking aloud to ourselves—either when we do it in company, in a social context, as if we did not even notice that we are not on our own, or when, being actually on our own, in the context of solitude, we do it as if we were our own companion—is often viewed as a sign, if not of madness, at least of defective socialisation. In European thought (in a very large sense), talking aloud to oneself has always been closely associated with melancholy—which was known during the 18th century as the “English malady”, but the concept dates back to Aristotle. I quote the Renaissance Oxford scholar, Robert Burton, whose huge book *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (which was published in 1621 under the name of Democritus Junior) is the authority on the topic:

“To discern all which symptoms the better, Rhasis the Arabian [*sic*] ² makes three degrees of them. The first is,

falsa cogitatio, false conceits and idle thoughts: to misconstrue and amplify, aggravating everything they conceive or fear; the second is, *falso cogitata loqui*, to talk to themselves, or to use inarticulate incondite [crude] voices, speeches, obsolete gestures, and plainly to utter their minds and conceits of their hearts, by their words and actions, as to laugh, weep, to be silent, not to sleep, eat their meat, etc; the third is to put in practice that which they think or speak³.”

In short, that strange practice of talking to oneself is one the major symptoms of what we call today a mental pathology. For Burton, it is typical of old people

“such as have lived in action all their lives, had great employment, much business, much command, and many servants to oversee, and leave off *ex abrupto* [all of a sudden] ... They are overcome with melancholy in an instant: or if they do continue in such courses, they dote at last, (*senex bis puer* [old age is a second childhood]) and are not able to manage their estates through common infirmities incident in their age; full of ache, sorrow and grief, children again, dizzards, they curl [up] many times as they sit, and talk to themselves⁴...”

Of course Burton’s diagnosis is still relevant today. Our view of the practice of soliloquy remains broadly the same, even though we pay more attention nowadays to other aspects that do not fit the melancholy account, for instance to the way in which young children comment on what they are doing when they are playing or when they are concentrating on some activity. It would be weird to claim that the soliloquising of children is due to melancholy. However, even sometimes in the case of children, it is obvious that for the western mind being overheard by other people while talking to oneself is a strong reason for feeling embarrassed. In social practices, as you know, the experience of feeling embarrassed is very significant. It is a fact that soliloquising tends to be ridiculous (Shaftesbury, whom I will discuss soon, was well aware of that). Talking aloud to oneself sounds like a breach of decency. But at the same time, in other social contexts, soliloquy may be used as a clever strategy to whisper that which cannot be said directly to others. This is not the main use of self-discourse in the culture of the West. An expert in Japanese linguistics

explains that “parenthetical soliloquy” is often embedded in Japanese conversation as a means of communicating psychological closeness to the interlocutor without falling into plain speech and breaching the codes of politeness⁵. More generally, the use of soliloquy seems to involve a dialectical relation between plain or familiar speech and polite or formal speech. I will get back to that point later on, independently of the Japanese context of which I know very little.

To get back to Robert Burton, he bears the hallmark of melancholy. His book is a masterpiece on the topic because he was expert on it, in his flesh and bones. His main contribution to the history of soliloquy is his claim that it is a symptom, an effect of the black moods. However the significance of self-discourse is not confined to that. It does not concern only the history of psychiatry and psychology. It also appears at least in two other fields: firstly, in Christian religious practice; secondly, in Renaissance and early modern western drama.

Let us start with that second aspect. As you know, the famous “to be or not to be” scene in *Hamlet* is obviously a soliloquy⁶. Hamlet speaks to himself. I will not discuss in detail the controversial point of whether that self-discourse is or is not feigned. Does it express Hamlet’s inner thoughts to the audience (we could call that kind of self-discourse “meditative soliloquy”) or is it rather intended to be heard by his enemies (the other characters on the stage) in order to mislead them and, for instance, to make them believe that he is so desperate that he is unable to take action against Claudius (let us call it “strategic soliloquy”)? Is it a strategic soliloquy or a meditative one? Soliloquies are very common in Shakespearian drama. It certainly depends on the context whether they are used as means of expressing private thoughts through public speech (in that case the character on the stage is just thinking aloud and the soliloquy is a conventional representation of inward discourse), or if they are supposed to be overheard by other characters (then the self-discoursing character is not thinking aloud, but is actually speaking). In short, talking to oneself is also a dramatic convention, or rather, since it is ambiguous, a set of dramatic conventions, which might be as old as drama itself, and are very popular during the 17th century. Even if there is no direct and simple connection between that dramatic convention and the idea of soliloquy as a symptom of melancholy, it matters to my point today that Hamlet’s soliloquy in the first scene of the third act has often been viewed as a typical manifestation of melancholy.

Now I will just give a glimpse of the use of soliloquy in Christianity. I am thinking of Saint Augustine’s *Soliloquies* (387). I quote the very first lines:

“For many days I had been debating within myself many and diverse things, seeking constantly, and with anxiety, to find out my real self, my best good, and the evil to be avoided, when suddenly one—I know not, but eagerly strive to know, whether it were myself or another, within me or without—said to me:

R. Now consider: suppose you had discovered something concerning that which you are so constantly and anxiously seeking to know; to what would you entrust it, in order that you might give your attention to things following?

A. To memory, of course.

R. Is the memory an adequate custodian of all things which the mind discovers?

A. Hardly. In fact it cannot be.

R. Such things must, then, be written down⁷...”

The Augustinian meditative soliloquy is actually a dialogue between Augustine and Reason. Here reason is not reducible to a psychological faculty or even to Augustine’s superior self. In a way, it is a preceptor, of which Augustine is the pupil, and as such it is exterior to him and transcends him. The conversation with oneself is not a means of introspection, but is rather the vector of an indirect dialogue with God—indirect in so far as it is supervised by a director of conscience (“Reason”). It is an ascetic method, a spiritual training that combines writing with thinking and through which Augustine becomes able to hear someone else than himself. It is no wonder therefore if the *Soliloquies* often shift to prayer. Saint Augustine’s conversations with Reason were not as popular as their later imitation by an anonymous medieval theologian (traditional editions of *Soliloquies* used to include the spurious ones), but they remain the paradigm of the Christian soliloquy, which, far from being a monologue, is an indirect intercourse with the Deity.

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I move on to the second part of my argument. Those three lines of the history of soliloquy that I have all too briefly sketched, are present in Shaftesbury’s philosophy. Firstly, his work is the next step after Burton in the history of early modern English melancholy⁸—a very important step indeed, since he is the first philosopher who gives a positive meaning to the term “enthusiasm”. Secondly, as to the place of soliloquy in Renaissance and early modern drama, his philosophical diary, the *Askēmata*—his philosophical exercises which follow the model of Marcus Aurelius *To Himself*—, Shaftesbury quotes Hamlet’s soliloquies as an instance of the Stoic struggle with the representations and imaginations⁹. Thirdly, even though he is not on the side of

Augustine, but rather of the Stoics, Shaftesbury revives the ancient practice of discoursing with oneself as a means of moral and religious improvement. In short, it cannot be doubted that Shaftesbury’s philosophy embodies the main aspects of the 17th century views about self-discourse.

At the same time, Shaftesbury’s philosophy should not be considered as a mere expression of that culture. There is something more in him. I would not say something really new, since, on the contrary, my point is that Shaftesbury has rediscovered the ancient Stoic concept of self-discourse as a means of moral control. Here talking to oneself cannot be reduced to an ambiguous cultural practice. It is both a moral technique and a philosophical and logical concept, which cannot be understood apart from the Stoic system in which it makes sense.

To put it briefly, Stoic soliloquy is a means of making explicit the “implicit language” of our thoughts or imaginations. As Shaftesbury writes in his essay *Soliloquy or Advice to an Author* (published in 1710):

“One would think there is nothing easier with us than to know our own minds, and understand what our main scope was, what we plainly drove at, and what we proposed to ourselves, as our end, in every occurrence of our lives. But our thoughts have generally such an obscure implicit language, that it is the hardest thing in the world to make them speak out distinctly. For this reason, the right method is to give them voice and accent. And this, in our default, is what the moralists or philosophers endeavour to do, to our hand; when, as is usual, they hold us out a kind of vocal looking-glass, draw sound out of our breast, and instruct us to personate ourselves, in the plainest manner¹⁰.”

Then Shaftesbury gives a humorous example of that “obscure implicit language” from the Roman poet Persius (34-62) in the beginning of his second Satire:

“*Illa sibi introrsum, et sub lingua immurmurat: O si Ebullit patruī praeclarum funus...*”

“Inwardly to himself and secretly he mutters: ‘O if only My rich uncle could suddenly be buried’...”

In passing, let us draw attention to the context of this quotation from Persius, because it nicely illustrates the distinction that I have made above between strategic soliloquy and meditative soliloquy. Expressing to oneself the wish that our rich uncle be buried soon is an instance of meditative soliloquy—even though it is obviously a very bad one. But in the preceding verse, we find also an instance of strategic soliloquy, to which Persius opposes the meditative one:

“*Mens bona, fama, fides, haec clare, et ut audiat hospes.*”

“He says aloud, so that a passing stranger may hear: ‘<If only I could have> a good mind, fame and credit.’”

There is a gap between the feigned soliloquy (through which we want others to hear that we want to be good) and the real one (in which we express to ourselves our secret wishes). This is enough to suggest that the kind of soliloquy that matters to moral philosophy is not the strategic, but the meditative one.

The distinction between the meditative and the strategic soliloquy, combined with the view that soliloquy can appear either in solitude or in a social context, leads to suggest the following typology:

Types of soliloquy	<i>in a social context</i>	<i>in solitude</i>
<i>meditative</i>	soliloquy as inner discourse	soliloquy as inner discourse
<i>strategic</i>	soliloquy as a conversational or dramatic device	?

I am inclined to consider that soliloquy, in solitude, cannot be strategic, since there is nobody to hear. However, from a Shaftesburian viewpoint, talking aloud to oneself, when on one’s own, might also be viewed as a dramatic device on the inward scene.

For the author of *Soliloquy or Advice to an Author*, self-discourse must be practised as a means of moral improvement. Far from being transparent to ourselves, we have to question our own desires and representations in order to make them declare what they mean and aim at. Self-knowledge consists in self-questioning. It is the core of the ascetic method by which the Stoic apprentice can learn to discipline and control his representations:

“And here it is that our sovereign remedy and gymnastic method of soliloquy takes its rise: when by a certain powerful figure of inward rhetoric, the mind apostrophizes its own fancies, raises them in their proper shapes and personages, and addresses them familiarly, without the least ceremony or respect. By this means it will soon happen, that two formed parties will erect themselves within. For the imaginations or fancies being thus roundly treated, are forced to declare themselves, and take party¹¹.”

On the scene of that inner theatre, the rational part of the soul speaks plainly and frankly to the imaginations (the affective representations) in order to make them express what they really mean. Usually, our imaginations “conceal half their meaning” and hide themselves behind the oblique way of what pretends to be polite speech and actually is just hypocrisy. Thanks to the practice of soliloquy, our implicit

evaluations must declare themselves and are submitted to criticism.

It is important to notice that the ascetic practice of inward discourse is not considered by the Stoics as an implicit speech, but on the contrary as a means of making the implicit speech (namely, the evaluations that are silently attached to representations) “speak out”. The task of inward discourse is to make explicit what usually remains “silent”, in the sense of implicit (in that sense, when it is said that meditative soliloquy consists in talking aloud to oneself, “aloud” is opposed to “implicit”). We could say that there are two levels of inner discourse that correspond to the two levels of judgment: prejudgment and critical judgment.

I would also stress that the dialectics of “plain speech” and “polite speech” is essential to the Stoic soliloquy. It is well known that the ancient Cynics and Stoics used to value “parrhesia”, i. e. frankness in speaking the truth to others. To put the whole argument in a nutshell, soliloquy may be correctly viewed as the equivalent of “parrhesia” (free and plain speech) in the relation to oneself.

According to the Stoics, we would not desire something if we did not believe that it is a good thing. Believing that it is a good thing amounts to saying (implicitly) to oneself that it is good. That is the first stage of implicit inward discourse. The second stage, in which soliloquy consists, is that of explicit inward discourse, or, to put it more precisely, of the second-order inward discourse that makes explicit the first-order one. Here it is obvious that there is a direct connection—and even a mere identity—between the moral concept of soliloquy and the logical concept of *dianoia* (discursive thought). The aim of the practice of soliloquy is to question our imaginations or “fancies” so that they reduce themselves to what they consist of. To put it in other words, soliloquising aims at producing cognitive or adequate representations (*phantasiai katalêptikai*), i. e. representations that do not exceed what they represent. Let us get back to the teaching of Epictetus, which is the background of our discussion:

“As we exercise ourselves against sophistical questions, so we should exercise ourselves against imaginations (*phantasiai*); for these also ask questions to us. ‘The son of such a one is dead.’ Answer: it is not within the power of the will: it is not an evil. ‘The father of such a one has disinherited him. What do you think of it?’ It is a thing beyond the power of the will, not an evil. [...] If we train ourselves in this manner, we shall make progress; for we shall never assent to anything of which there is not an adequate representation (*phantasia katalêptikê*). Your son is dead. What happened? Your son is dead. Nothing more? Nothing. Your ship is lost.

What happened? Your ship is lost¹².”

The practice of soliloquy is that intelligent use of judgment by which we deflate the subjective (implicit) inward discourse and substitute adequate or objective representations for it. Moral soliloquy is identical with the intelligent or critical use of representations. From a logical viewpoint, it is nothing but that exercise of judgment that aims at cognition in a dialectical context.

Despite the fact that Shaftesbury draws obviously on the main features of the use of soliloquy in early modern culture, which I have outlined in the first part of this paper, he adds another dimension to the concept of inward discourse, insofar as he revives the moral significance that the concept had had in Stoic philosophy. Of course the logical aspects of Stoic *dianoia* and especially the logic of judgment, which is the core of Stoicism, remain in the background, hidden by Shaftesbury’s literary writing, and visible only to the attentive reader.

To conclude, the use of the term “soliloquy” to denote the critical exercise of judgment is justified by the fact that *logos* is both language and thought and also, more specifically, by the Stoic view according to which affective representations being somewhat confusedly merged with value prejudgments¹³, the rational control of representations consists in making them speak out and show what they are up to. It is well known that contemporary philosophers are quite reluctant to accept the idea of a “private language” under the pretext that granting the existence of such a language would entail that we have a privileged access to our own thoughts. I have suggested that the Stoic conception of soliloquy has little to do with that view. It does not rest on the assumption that we are transparent to ourselves. It is not interested in the question of the denotation of language, but rather in the effect that rational discourse can produce not only on the interlocutor but also on the speaker. However it is clear that the Stoic concept of inward discourse supposes that we ought to control our representations and indeed that we are able to do it.

Notes

- 1 On Shaftesbury, see Masahiro Hamashita, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics* (in Japanese), chap. 2, 1993.
- 2 Burton hints at the Persian physician, philosopher and alchemist Al-Razi (865-925).
- 3 Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, iii, 1, 4.
- 4 *Ibid.*, I, ii, 1, 5.
- 5 Yoko Hasegawa, “A Study of Soliloquy in Japanese”,

- Proceedings of the 31st Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 2005.
- 6 On the reception of Hamlet in Japan and its adaptation for the *kabuki* theatre, see Kaori Ashizu, “What’s Hamlet to Japan”, online paper:
http://www.leoyan.com/global-language.com/enfolded/BIBL/_HamJap.htm
- 7 *The Soliloquies of St. Augustine*, translated by R. E. Cleveland, Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., 1910.
- 8 As is shown by Claire Crignon-De Oliveira, in her *De la mélancolie à l’enthousiasme. Robert Burton (1577-1640) et Anthony Ashley Cooper, comte de Shaftesbury (1671-1713)*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2006.
- 9 It is interesting to note that contemporary scholars, without being necessarily aware that Shaftesbury was in favour of that interpretation—sometimes defend the Stoic interpretation of Hamlet. See, for instance, Francesca Bugliani. “‘In the mind to suffer’: Hamlet’s Soliloquy, ‘To be, or not to be.’” *Hamlet Studies*, 17, 1-2 (1995), p. 10-42.
- 10 *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 1711 edition, I, p. 171.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 12 Arrian, *The Discourses of Epictetus*, III, 8.
- 13 On the confusion between representation and judgment in Marcus Aurelius, see Pierre Hadot, *La Citadelle Intérieure. Introduction aux Pensées de Marc-Aurèle*, Paris, Fayard, 1992, p. 121.

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