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DE LA MÉCONNAISSANCE

The idea of «méconnaissance» plays a major role in the work of René Girard. It is one of the central concepts of his mimetic theory. «Méconnaissance» is at the heart of the mechanism that brings about the resolution to the mimetic crisis, and it is, according to him, a necessary condition for success of this resolution. Because this self-regulating mechanism of violence is at the origin of human institutions, «méconnaissance» remains present as a fundamental dimension of culture. There are however among those who are interested in mimetic theory numerous debates, and disagreements concerning «méconnaissance»: what is it? What precisely is its role in human culture? What is its value? Further on Girard argues that Christian revelation lifts the veil of «méconnaissance» concerning the innocence of the victims of the scapegoating process that protects us from our own violence. As a result, this revelation reduces the efficiency of that mechanism and of the institutions that flow from it, and progressively brings about the demise of all that was built upon «the founding murder». Is culture as we know it then doomed to disappear as a result of the revelation of its violent origin? Alternatively, is a perfectly transparent culture, one from which all «méconnaissance» has disappeared possible, or even simply conceivable? Given that what is disappearing with the revelation of the fundamental «méconnaissance» that is at the heart of human culture is the mechanism that historically, more or less successfully, protected us against our own violence, it seems that we are now left with the stark, and probably impossible, choice between abandoning all violence and total destruction. Therefore some authors have been wondering if it is possible to 'cheat', so to speak, with the knowledge of violence that we have gained, and to devise institutions that incorporate it. Institutions that can take advantage of what we have learned, while retaining a form of opacity that is indispensable to their stability.

1. How is «*méconnaissance*» possible?

Before attempting to answer these fundamental, urgent and dramatic questions, it might be useful to ask more simply what is «*méconnaissance*»? What exactly does the word refer to? Is «*méconnaissance*» to be understood as a mistake, as false information, as an illusion, or a form of delusion? Until now, I have retained (and I will continue to do so) the French word «*méconnaissance*» and avoided translating it into English. In fact different translations of «*méconnaissance*» have been used in English translations of Girard or in his own English language writings. The most common perhaps are «*misrecognition*» or «*miscognition*». However, many French readers argue that there is no single translation of «*méconnaissance*» that adequately captures all of the term's connotations and nuances. There is more here, I think, than just another expression of French chauvinism. What is involved, I will argue, is a different understanding of knowledge.

Interestingly bilingual dictionaries give as English equivalent of «*méconnaissance*» first 'ignorance' and second 'misreading'. French dictionaries define «*méconnaissance*» as «*le fait de méconnaître, de ne pas apprécier, de ne pas reconnaître la valeur de...*». That is to say: «*the fact of ignoring, of not appreciating, of not recognizing the value of...*». 'Méconnaître' then is to ignore, it is to fail to appreciate or to recognize the value of someone or something. It is ignorance in the sense of the verb 'to ignore' which, in English, does not simply mean a failure to know, but also willfully disregarding something or someone. Thus there is an active dimension in «*méconnaissance*». The heart of the concept is not so much the idea of a false or mistaken belief, of inappropriate 'propositional content', as that of a particular relation to knowledge. That is why I said that the difficulties of adequately translating «*méconnaissance*» into English point towards a different conception of knowledge.

In the English speaking world there is a long philosophical tradition of understanding knowledge as 'true, justified belief'. In that particular tradition anything that qualify as knowledge is by definition true; the agent's mental attitude to the propositional content, to what he or she knows, is one of belief and that belief is justified. Therefore if what you believe is not true, it is not knowledge; if your belief is not justified, it is not knowledge; or if your attitude towards the propositional content is not one of belief, but for example one of irony, doubt or willful disregard, again it is not

knowledge. However, the two components of 'mé-connaissance', 'mé' as in 'mé-prendre' (to mistake), 'mé-dire' (to speak ill), or 'mé-content' (unhappy) and 'connaissance' (knowledge) clearly suggest that the meaning of the term can only be 'false knowledge' or 'bad knowledge', literally 'mis-knowledge'. Thus the verb 'méconnaître', should mean 'mis-knowing'. However that is something which is impossible in the dominant philosophical tradition in the English speaking world. When knowledge is construed as true justified belief, 'mis-knowing' is more than a mere oxymoron, it is a self-contradiction.

Should we conclude then that «méconnaissance» is an inconsistent idea, a meaningless concept, a mere sound? I don't think so, but we need a different conception of knowledge to make sense of this 'mis-knowledge', of this 'false', 'bad', 'wrong' or 'ill' knowledge. Many years ago, Karl Popper put forward the idea of «objective knowledge». Knowledge, he argued, should not be reduced to beliefs, that is to say, to the thought content of individual agents, to propositions and ideas imprisoned in peoples' head. Rather, it should be considered as a kind of exosomatic artefact. Knowledge is objective, according to Popper, in the sense that it is something in the world, which various agents can grasp and use, each one in his own particular way, rather than in the sense of private thought content, that is identically repeated over and over again in myriads of individual subjects. Knowledge is like a tool which we can use to do things, to change the world that surrounds us. In the context of such a conception of knowledge, it becomes possible to make sense of 'mis-knowledge' in two rather straightforward ways.

First, there are better and worst tools to do the same thing, and there are better and worst families of tools as well as better and worst tokens of the same type of tool. For example it is better to use a screwdriver than a hammer to drive a screw, some types of screwdrivers are better than others and some individual screwdrivers are better than others of the same type. Second, there are better and worst ways to use the same tool to do either the same or different tasks; carpenters are more or less gifted as carpenters. «Méconnaissance» I believe corresponds to both types of failings. Our knowledge can be more or less adequate for the task at hand, and here «méconnaissance» refers primarily to the content of knowledge, to its truth. We can also use our knowledge more or less successfully and here «méconnaissance» primarily refers to the ability and attitudes of the tool wielding animal. In order to make

sense of «*méconnaissance*» in this way, it is not necessary to adopt all, or even much of Popper's philosophy of knowledge, all we need to accept is that a statement about the world can be more or less exact or true, and still constitute a form of knowledge, and that agents can have different attitudes towards this knowledge. It then becomes possible to say, as Girard sometimes does, that mis-knowledge augments as knowledge grows (*la méconnaissance croît au fur et à mesure que la connaissance augmente*). In other words, one can have 'perfect knowledge' about something, in the sense of true and justified belief, and yet still be in complete «*méconnaissance*».

2. The origin of «*méconnaissance*»

The «*méconnaissance*» which interests Girard is not just any kind of inadequate knowledge or of inappropriate relation to what we know. In fact, it could be argued that according to him «*méconnaissance*» precedes «*connaissance*», that 'mis-knowledge' comes before 'knowledge', which is a way of saying that knowledge always constitutes a gain over an original ignorance, an ignorance that is not only a passive failure to know, but also an active form of 'not-knowing'. This original ignorance, unlike what Rawls claims, is not a veil that prudishly protects the subject from those elements of knowledge that may subvert the pure exercise of his or her rationality, but a mist in which nothing appears clearly. It will be objected perhaps that this priority of «*méconnaissance*» is impossible. There cannot be 'false-knowledge' or 'bad-knowledge', it will be argued, before there is knowledge. 'Bad-knowledge' necessarily implies the prior existing knowledge. It is true that there cannot be a bad tool before there are any tools, but clearly there does not need to be any good tool before there can be bad tools, though we may of course have a hard time recognizing a bad tool as such before we have a better one at hand. That, I think, is precisely Girard's point.

The objection that there cannot be 'false-knowledge' before there is some form of knowledge supposes that among all that we 'know' there are some elements of 'true' or 'real' knowledge, that can in principle be distinguished from the rest, and that knowledge grows, or becomes more adequate, as the number of these elements of 'knowledge' augments. This, however, brings us back to the previous conception, where knowledge is always by definition true. Girard, to the contrary, repeatedly argues that what is true

and what is false cannot be separated as if they constituted discrete elements some of which correspond to knowledge and others to falsehood. Therefore, the reduction of «méconnaissance», cognitive progress, corresponds more to the reorganization of our knowledge than to the addition of new elements. That is why Girard often compares this experience to a religious conversion; a conversion which does not consist so much in discovering new knowledge as of suddenly seeing everything in a new light or from a different point. According to him, it is precisely those shifts in our outlook on the world that allow our knowledge to expand and that make us able to progress into new domains of inquiry.

The «méconnaissance» that interests Girard concerns our relation to others and that is why it affects and taints all we know. Not only because most of what we know we learn from others, or because we mostly only know what others know, but mainly because we do not realize or want to recognize the role others play in the determination of our «true and justified beliefs». «Méconnaissance» primarily concerns others and our relations to them. What we ignore is the extent to which others, by their mere presence, act upon us; determine our beliefs, our desires, our choices and preferences. The point of «méconnaissance» is precisely that we ignore it, not necessarily that we do not know it. So «méconnaissance», like «mauvaise foi» ('bad faith') according to Sartre, who clearly influenced Girard on this matter, implies a sort of 'lying to oneself'.

It is true that lying to oneself as opposed to lying to others is often considered extremely difficult to understand. In order to successfully lie to himself or herself, it is argued, an individual would have to know that X is true, because if one does not know that X is true one is not lying when she asserts that X is not true, and one would have to simultaneously believe that X is not true, because if she does not believe that X is not true, she has not been lied to and has not lied to herself. This seems like an extremely difficult thing to do as it would require one to simultaneously believe and not believe that X is true and justified. Furthermore the common solution which divides the individual into an unconscious which 'knows' that X is true and a consciousness that falsely believes that X is not true, is unavailable here. For when such is the case it can be argued that it is not the individual that lies to herself, but part A or individual 'I' that lies to part B of individual 'I'.

There is however another way of understanding 'lying to

oneself', or if you prefer there is also another form of 'lying to oneself' which implies an altogether different intention of action than does 'lying to others'. Start with the following example: suppose you and me are both interested in the same girl. She and I are both at the library where I am peacefully enjoying her presence and she has just gotten up looking for a book, or perhaps she is gone to the washroom. At that moment you, my arch rival, arrive and ask me 'Is Julia there?', and I, since I would rather you do not meet her, lie to you and respond 'I'm not sure, I think she went back home', while I know perfectly well that she is still here and will be coming back to her seat at any moment. If however, unbeknownst to me, Julia has suddenly decided to return home and you acting on the false information I gave you, meet her there, my plan will have failed miserably. This example indicates that when we lie to others, we seek to manipulate the information they have about the world, but we want the world to remain as it is. When I tell you that Julia has gone back home I do not wish her to have returned there, where I am now sending you. When lying to others (at least in this way) we do not aim at changing the world, in the sense of making it adequate to the propositional content of the lie, to the contrary a lie is only successful, both as an illocutionary act and in regard of the intention that animates the liar, if the world remains different from what the lie says that it is. Of course the world may, and often does, change as a consequence of the lie, and many times bringing about that transformation was part of our objective when we lied. However what we do not wish is for the lie itself to be true. Lying to others does not aim at changing the world in the sense that it does not aim at realizing its propositional content in the world. In that sense, a lie is anything but a performative.

When one lies to oneself however the intention and the conditions for the lie to be successful are often quite different. Suppose that I am finding more and more indications that my wife is having an affair. Yet I do not want to recognize that this can be the case and I deny flatly the relevance of the growing evidence. My friends and others observing my behavior may say that I am lying to myself, that I know, but that I refuse to believe what I know. Note however that when I say that my wife is not having an affair, I want this statement to be true. I want the world to be as I say that it is, unlike what is the case when I lie to others, where I want the world not to be as I say that it is. This difference I believe is crucial; lying to oneself is guided by a different intention than lying to

others. This fundamental intention is to change the world; it is to make the world as we say that it is. Of course it may be argued that this intention is doomed to failure. In this case this is certainly true, if my wife is having an affair my not wanting it to be the case will not change anything. But, as we all know, our intention to change the world is not always doomed to failure. This fundamental intention, this desire to make the world as we say it is, is the reason of the close relationship between violence and lying to oneself, for violence also aims at changing the world.

«Méconnaissance» constitutes a form of lying to oneself. In knowledge classically understood with truth as its regulative ideal, we try to adapt or adjust our statements and our beliefs to the world. We seek to make what we say and believe adequate, 'similar' to the way the world is made. Our knowledge aims at 're-presenting' the world as it is. In «méconnaissance», to the opposite, we want the world to conform to what we say or believe. The goal of an adequate representation or fit between the world and what we believe is the same in both cases, but the direction of fittingness or of adaptation is opposite. «Méconnaissance» is 'mis-knowledge' not because the desire to change the world is irrational or unacceptable, but because of where this intention intervenes here: within knowledge itself. It inverts the direction of adaptation within the exercise of cognition itself.

Nonetheless, it may in fact be argued that the desire to know the world is inseparable from the desire to change it, that our ability to change the world requires knowledge and that this capacity increases as our knowledge grows. That is certainly the case and that is the reason why «connaissance» and «méconnaissance» are inseparable and why the growth of our knowledge rests on successfully articulating to each other these two 'contradictory' intentions and strategies in our relation to the world. We can understand in this way «méconnaissance» can never be entirely expelled out of «connaissance», or excluded from our knowledge of the world.

3. «Méconnaissance» in culture

There is also in Girard a more cultural and less individual use of the term «méconnaissance». Here «méconnaissance» refers to an absence of knowledge concerning the violent origin of culture and more particularly to the fundamental role of the scapegoating mechanism. These two meanings of «méconnaissance», the individual and the cultural, are closely related for at least two reasons.

First, because the ignorance which cultures manifest concerning their violent origin is usually not conceived by Girard as a mere absence of knowledge, but as the result of a kind of «shying away» or of refusing to probe further a body of knowledge which, if questioned properly, would reveal the truth about the origin. Hence «méconnaissance» in culture is also «méconnaissance» in the sense of not wanting the world 'to be like that'; of not wanting the culture we love and cherish to have sprung from the blood of victims. There is a second reason, which is that cultural «méconnaissance» ultimately finds its ground and origin in individual «méconnaissance». The shared collective cultural «méconnaissance» proceeds from everybody individual «méconnaissance» and may be viewed as a kind of 'unanimous misunderstanding'. The violent scapegoating that puts an end to the sacrificial crisis is described by Girard as a self-organizing mechanism of violence. As violence intensifies and includes more and more members of the community, individuals become doubles of each other. This loss of differences facilitates rallying against a unique antagonist on whom all others can simultaneously discharge their violence. This unanimity-minus-one brings back peace, and the victim, who was randomly designated through the blind substitution of antagonists, retroactively appears having been singularly responsible for both the violence and its end. Such according to Girard is the violent origin of the sacred. Cultural «méconnaissance» is precisely the transcendent prestige this self-regulating mechanism of violence confers to its victim as it transforms a dead body into a deity. What this «méconnaissance» hides is the radically human and violent origin of culture and of the sacred. All of human culture, argues Girard, stems from this mechanism and consequently plays a role in protecting us against violence in its various and sundry forms. However given the self-regulating nature of this mechanism, anyhow it is ultimately always violence that protects us against violence, or, to put it in other words, it is violently that culture protects us against violence. Though this violence that culture contains, Girard argues, diminishes as distance from the origin grows and as the traces of the founding scapegoating are slowly erased.

Christianity, according to Girard, reveals the purely human origin of this foundation and as well as the arbitrary designation of the victim. In consequence it ruins, he argues, the efficacy of this self-organising mechanism. It progressively reduces its ability to protect us from violence. It destroys the paradoxical capacity of

violence being used against violence in order to reduce violence. What exactly does this mean? How does this revelation function? At one level it simply means that, if the agents do not all 'believe' that the victim, against whom they simultaneously discharge their violence, is guilty, in other words if they do not believe that she deserves the violence it suffers, the transfer will not take place. The operation will not succeed; the victim's death will not bring peace back. I wrote 'believe' (with inverted commas) because there is a sense in which all believe that the victim is guilty because they all simultaneously discharge their violence against her and because the victim's death brings back peace. This 'belief' as all forms of «méconnaissance» is thus inseparable from an action. Therefore the revelation that is necessary in order to make unanimous victimage impossible is something that will help dissolve individual «méconnaissance», something that will make less likely both the actions and representations that come with it. This, as I argued elsewhere, is not so much the revelation of the innocence of victim, as the revelation of the innocence of the other, which is not so much the revelation of the 'sanctity' of the other, as the revelation of his or her radical and fragile humanity. What destroys this «méconnaissance» is not a belief, a propositional content, but new attitudes like forgiveness and charity extended to all. It is not therefore only «connaissance», knowledge in a classical sense that is involved in this revelation, it is also the 'mé' of «mé-connaissance» that is transformed and weakened. That is why this «revelation» makes the unanimity against the victim more fragile and short-lived. This fracture of unanimity, according to Girard, slowly consumes cultures from the inside.

It is in fact the fracture of the unanimity, rather than the revelation itself that transforms our cultures. It is true that this fracture is the result of the revelation, but not alone, it is also the result of the fact that «méconnaissance» persists. Individual «méconnaissance» does not disappear, but it tends to become so to say 'discontinuous'. It is in fact the interplay between revelation and «méconnaissance» that drives the system, or if you prefer, the interplay between 'mé-connaissance' and 'connaissance'. In the last sections of this paper I would like to illustrate this thesis with the help of two, at first sight rather different, cultural objects: Ernesto De Martino's analysis of tarantism in *La terra del rimorso* and John Rawls's *Theory of justice*.

4. Veiled knowledge

De Martino's field research on tarantism in the south of Italy is presented as an inquiry whose primary objective is to determine whether tarantism is a disease, either a medical condition caused by the bite of a spider or another animal, or a form of mental illness, or if it constitutes a particular cultural formation, a minor form of religion as De Martino will conclude at the end of his inquiry. In fact such a debate, or perhaps a slightly different one, had been going on for centuries. From the age of the counter-reformation at least, 'educated' persons have been asking: what is behind this strange 'superstition' according to which those who have been bitten by a spider not only can be 'cured' by dancing, but are actually forced to dance, for days without end, when they hear the right music? Beginning in the 17th century, people started asking: are the symptoms of tarantism the result of a real spider's bite, the expression of a particular form of mental derangement, or perhaps, even, a sign of possession by the devil? Apart from the disappearance of the last mentioned alternative, possession by the devil, the debate hadn't changed very much by the time De Martino arrived in Puglia in the late 1950s.

In fact, De Martino and his research team rapidly ruled out the first two alternatives, either a reaction to animal venom or mental illness, and the book is essentially dedicated to the description and analysis of tarantism as a cultural formation. It is nonetheless interesting that these two ways of misunderstanding tarantism remained common for such a long time. Consider first the animal venom hypothesis. According to its victims tarantism can be 'caused' by many different types of animals, either a spider, but any one of a number of different types of spider, or a scorpion, or a snake. In fact, a bite is not always necessary, for example, one can become a tarantata (a victim of tarantism) by seeing a snake killed. One can also become a tarantata as a result of showing disrespect to St Paul, the patron saint who protects people from tarantism and who can cure the disease. Further, most victims of tarantism usually experience their symptoms again every year, at about the same date as when the first crisis happened, and this yearly recurrence of symptoms can continue for forty or fifty years! No known animal venom can cause such a phenomenon. Of course it may be argued that tarantism is a cultural formation that is 'grafted' upon a real medical condition. Perhaps, but observe. Tarantism is not only subject to a particular temporal rhythm, but

also to strange variations in space. Outside of a well circumscribed area around Lecce and Galatina spiders do not cause tarantism, and even in that area there are sanctuaries protected by particular saints where the 'disease' is unknown. Add to this a few more recent observations. Spiders usually bite men who work in the fields, but tarantism predominantly strikes women to a proportion of about three to one. Most people who seek medical help for bites from venomous animals do not show any symptoms of tarantism, and tarantati do not seek medical help. Finally, the area of Italy where tarantism is rife is known to have fewer spiders than adjacent areas where tarantism is not found! Of course, as De Martino recognizes, it may be the case that some tarantati have been bit by spiders or other venomous animals, but clearly this accident which happened to some individuals cannot explain the social phenomenon of tarantism. The situation concerning mental illness is a bit different. Tarantati do manifest abnormal behavior and some signs of psychic disorders, at least when they are in crisis, and some individuals also do at other times, but these symptoms are relatively mild, they do not correspond to any particular mental disease and they vary extensively from one tarantata to the next. In other words, persons who suffer from tarantism have usually experienced some form of trauma or of unresolved conflict, but their symptoms do not indicate any particular pathological condition.

Therefore the question arises why did these manifestly false interpretations of tarantism (especially the first one) persist for so long? (In fact they remain popular even today). De Martino in his interviews of tarantati, and of their families and friends found that in every case the first episode of tarantism, which usually strikes teenagers and young adults, happens at a time when the person experiences strong social and psychic conflicts or trauma, like a forced wedding, an impossible love, lost of one's employment, death of a loved one, etc. Tarantism, argues De Martino, allows a person to express through her symptoms, and through the burden they impose on others, her rejection of an impossible social situation, which for various cultural reasons cannot be addressed directly. It also gives her a day or two of glory when she is at the centre of the community's attention. Finally, sometimes only after many years, it allows the person to come to term with the difficulty. De Martino also shows that tarantism, both the 'disease' and the musical and choreuthic cure, constitutes a well established ritual in which the tarantata, the musicians and the audience all have their properly

defined roles. As mentioned earlier De Martino defines tarantism as a minor form of religion and this religious ritual, according to him, functions as a way of alleviating conflicts within the community, and of reconciling agents with a life that is a constant source of frustrations and tensions. Such tensions, frustrations and unresolved conflicts form a background of 'remorse': which he defines as a relation to a past that cannot be changed and that could not have been different. Tarantism is, says De Martino, a means of coming to terms with remorse. Hence this 'minor religious formation' fulfils the normal role of religion and of the sacred according to Girard. It is not the 'opium of the people', but a means of protecting families and communities from tensions and conflicts that threaten them, offering them a minor catharsis through the actions of the tarantata, who is halfway between a scapegoat and a sacred being. Of course this is not the way De Martino presents his finding, but this Girardian reading very naturally comes to mind.

From this point of view, one interesting aspect of *La terra del rimorso* is how much all participants in this ritual – the tarantati, their families and neighbors – are close to knowing the whole truth about tarantism. They are well aware of the fact that those who are struck by tarantism are often living difficult times or caught in irresolvable conflicts. They even point this out to the anthropologist. In fact, they know a lot more about tarantism, about its function and purpose, than 'scientists' who try to reduce it to a disease, either physical or mental. What allows them to have this greater knowledge, I suspect, is the fact that they 'believe' in spiders that make you dance and who dance with you to the rhythm of a specific type of music, different spiders reacting to different music. Spiders that prefer different colors and that will die of exhaustion after dancing with you for three days. But who can nonetheless pass on their venom, and their victims, to their daughters, their sisters or even their grand-daughters. They, in turn, will make you sick and dance with you until they also die. Their friends and families all 'believe' this. They believe it in the sense that they are ready to spend a large part of their savings, or even to borrow money, in order to pay for musicians who will provide a cure by making you dance, and to feed them as well as at least part of the audience, for two or three days, as long as it takes! They also go through the trouble of decorating the patient's room with tissues and scarves of the particular colour that suits the spider and hang from the ceiling strings that look like a web so that

the spider can feel at home and comfortable. Finally they take a yearly pilgrimage to St Paul's chapel in Galatina. These 'beliefs', this «méconnaissance», is probably what allows them to know so much, because this «méconnaissance», the actions that make it up are precisely what prevents the conflicts, tensions and rivalries that lurk behind tarantism from destroying families and communities.

When Ernesto De Martino conducted his field research in the south of Italy in 1959 he concluded that tarantism was a dying tradition. He judged that his observation in the field corresponded to the scattered remains of what had been a much richer cultural formation whose traces he found in ancient writings and other cultural artefacts from the past. He partially blamed the Catholic Church and partially the modern State for the demise of tarantism. He was probably right on both counts. However the fact that he conducted his inquiry within the ruins of a cultural edifice which for the most part had already disappeared raises an important question to which it is difficult to bring any clear answer: the fact that the extensive knowledge which participants had of the inner workings of the phenomena corresponded to the normal functioning of the tradition was it a sign of its advanced state of dissolution or the cause of its disappearance?

5. A land without remorse

John Rawls in his *Theory of justice* introduces a new type of device in moral and political philosophy: the veil of ignorance. This is a two step procedure. First we are asked to imagine individuals who are called upon to choose the best theory of justice to regulate their common existence. It is therefore not us who are choosing the best theory of justice, but them. That is the first step. Then we are asked to imagine that they are placed behind a «veil of ignorance» that filters the type of information which they can access. Behind that veil of ignorance agents cannot know anything of what concerns them personally. They do know who they are. They do not know if they are rich or poor, to which social class they belong, what their profession is, whether they are risk adverse or not, and so on. The veil of ignorance makes them, so to speak, anonymous in their own eyes. However it allows the passage of all general information concerning society and people. Thus, they can know our best theories about society, economics or psychology, as well as the results of natural science that are relevant to the under-

standing of social life. The goal of the device is to prevent them from being biased in their own favour, when they are asked to choose a theory of justice. They have access to all knowledge that can be relevant to their decision, and are 'protected' from the irrelevant information that could prevent them from reaching the right conclusion.

In view of the nature of the above argument, we can conclude that hopefully we will learn something about justice, by seeing how 'they' will choose in this ideal situation, where 'they' are not distracted by the advantage that each one 'naturally' gives to himself or herself. The goal of the veil of ignorance is to render our vision clearer, as it protects us from the passions and biases that blind us. Of course, we who are reading John Rawls's *Theory of justice* have the knowledge of who we are and of our situation in society. We also have interests of which we are well aware, and know which social arrangement would serve them best, but we are asked to ignore all this. Understood in this way the veil of ignorance constitutes a willful form of ignorance, a conscious «méconnaissance» from which it is hoped that moral knowledge will emerge.

Given its structure, once the veil of ignorance is lifted, and agents discover who they are, their weakness and advantages, they should have no regrets concerning the decision they previously reached. No matter what it is, this decision was reached in ideal conditions. No one can object to it, its rationality and fairness are unimpeachable. In that sense, a just society is a land without remorse. More precisely it is a land where remorse may have a cause, but where it cannot have a reason. It is a land where remorse is illegitimate. Given the place of the veil of ignorance in the conceptual economy of Rawls's theory if, now that you know what was previously hidden from you, you regret the decision that you took under the veil of ignorance, your desire to change what happened cannot be justified.

«Méconnaissance», the unfounded beliefs that associate spiders, dance, music and colors, according to De Martino, is what makes remorse possible, in the sense that it allows agents to come to term with a past they regret. Here, to the contrary, «méconnaissance» makes remorse impossible, in the sense that it deprives agents of all means of dealing with a past they regret. Of course it may be answered that in this case the past does not exist, the original position is a logical fiction that by definition takes place in

the eternal present. True enough, but it can also be argued that what this «méconnaissance» willfully hides, by excluding all knowledge of the relations that we have with each other, are the sources of frustration and tensions that lead to regret and remorse. Educated persons who reject tarantism as a meaningless superstition know nothing of the specifics of the conflicts and tension that exist in the society that cultivates the musical cure. More precisely they believe that these conflicts and tensions have their origin in poverty and in the cultural and technological backwardness that is responsible for it. Of this general backwardness, tarantism constitutes, in their eyes, an evident symptom.

There are many forms of «méconnaissance» and none of them, I believe, is an endangered species. However, the «méconnaissance» that completely misreads the role of «méconnaissance», threatens the stability of our societies much more than the knowledge of its violent origin does.

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