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The Monadic Art of Collective Navel-Gazing

“With all due respect, that’s just navel-gazing”. Nobody has ever said these words to me out loud when confronted with my scholarship. I imagine, however, that many people have dismissed my ideas as just that: useless, fruitless, pointless self-mirroring. Navel-gazing. The act of looking at the centre of one’s own belly, literally or metaphorically. Staring at your own navel narrows down your field of vision. You ignore what is happening around you. That is why navel-gazing is decried as narcissistic and myopic – but there is an art to it. If you wanted to peer eyeball to navel, as it were, you would need to be quite bendy; and to be that, you would need to train often and relentlessly. Consider yogis folding upon themselves in the “rabbit”, the “humble warrior” – or the “self-reflexive scholar”. They are able to look at their navels from many different angles. Less flexible people will always only see their navels from the same angle: slightly slanted from above. A mirror helps, of course. As does another pair of eyes.

Imagine a group of people looking at each other and their metaphorical navels, sharing with each other what they see. Doing some intellectual yoga and accepting 17th-century philosopher Leibniz as our guru, we can imagine these people as monads, windowless mirrors of being. They all perceive and mirror the same surroundings, but from different standpoints. This situatedness makes their perceptions and their accounts of those perceptions unique and valuable. Would not collecting these individual stories, and adding them together, give a more complete account of the surroundings?

The focus on individual experience and how individuals make sense of their experiences has rightly (re)gained a place in the systematic construction of knowledge under the banner of the “biographical turn”, to use a term coined by Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tom Wengraf.¹ Biographising ought not to be misunderstood as the mere chronicling of individual lives. Rather, it aims to capture the interplay of the personal and the social, of structure and agency. One of its basic assumptions is that “formal systems are played out in interaction with informal cultures and structures and through the lives and strategies of individuals.”² Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of the workings of society, one has to

1 Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tom Wengraf, “Introduction: The Biographical Turn,” in *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*, ed. Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tom Wengraf (London: Routledge, 2000), 1–30.

2 Tom Wengraf, Prue Chamberlayne and Joanna Bornat, “A Biographical Turn in the Social Sciences? A British-European View”, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 2, no. 2 (2002): 253.

consider individuals' life stories. And since an individual's perspective on their own literal and metaphorical navel is unique, the biographical turn should always imply an autobiographical turn. Piecing together these three unique perspectives – the autobiographical, the biographical, and the structures of society – in their complex interplay yields a more truthful account of what is happening around and with us. It will only succeed as a joint effort, practising the monadic art of collective navel-gazing.