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On the Economy of Research Gifts, Contributions, and Commodities in Organization Studies

ABSTRACT

Reflection is often viewed as a specific intrapersonal process of epistemological questioning, but this is by necessity only part of the phenomenon. I will here argue for a critique of reflection and vanity in the social sciences by way of an inquiry into the academic economy. By recasting this as a hybrid phenomena, and then showing how such a reading can be used to reflect on the nature of reflection in academic work, I try to outline a project of developing a post-moralizing social science.

Keywords: economy, gifts, career, value, reflection in organization studies

A PRELUDE

Almost five thousand years ago, there were pilgrims walking to the Celestial City, as these two honest persons are: and Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, with their companions, perceiving by the path that the pilgrims made, that their way to the city lay through this town of Vanity, they contrived here to set up a fair; a fair wherein, should be sold all sorts of vanity, and that it should last all the year long: therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold, as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands,

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children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

And, moreover, at this fair there is at all times to be seen juggling cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind.

– John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

What is reflected in reflection? In the gaze of vanity, which is the gaze of the one reflecting, what is seen? Reflection in social studies, as it is usually discussed, has peculiarly enough always meant one of two things; methodology or auto-biography. In the former case, reflection has become something of a meta-methodology, an invocation of doubt that has often taken on an almost ritualistic air – a whirlpool of continuous exhortations to think everything through just one more time, closely attending to the possibility that someone, somewhere, has not yet had their subjectivity properly mulled. In the latter, reflection has become a byword for evermore excessive exhibitions of academics wallowing in their own self-importance, in which people in the name of reflection can engage in seemingly endless diatribes regarding their own lives – something you'd think interests only themselves, if that. Not unsurprisingly, when academics brandish the word "reflection", many shudder and shy away.

In the following, I will attempt to do something slightly different, whilst still keeping to the notion of reflection. Often, this very word is taken altogether too literally, so that the reflection of which we speak is understood as that of a mirror. Such a device of, yes, reflecting surfaces, obviously does something that pleases the average researcher, namely portrays him or her anew, and thus gives the researcher the possibility to bask in his or her own glory once more. Reflection is through this closely related to vanity, and we can here see a connection to the way in which Slavoj Žižek (1993, 2000) has discussed the ideological, as the performative aspects of ideology will always be, in part, an identity-project (see also the discussion on "interpassivity" (Žižek 1998)). Consequently, much of what is written in the name of reflection is written to glorify the writer: "See my faults, my manifold of ways, my whole delightful being!" Such blatant exhibitionism, sometimes elevated to works of an oddly shameless art (where the willing suspension of disbelief is abused inasmuch as we are expected to think that the personal life, not to mention the personal feelings of the academic would in any way be interesting to the reading public), does however distract us from the more important and thought-provoking aspect of it all.

To reflect, i.e. to re-engage with some mode of thinking or expression, is at the same time an act of re-framing. Just as a mirror uses available light to throw back an image of what's in front of it, reflection casts new light on something, illuminates it from another angle. This, then, is the other aspect of reflection – the less vain one – and it depends more on finding new ways to talk about a subject than merely repeating the formulaic infinite regress of "reflective science" as an

identity project. Basically, this kind of reflection depends on our ability to talk about a phenomenon within a novel framework, making the familiar unfamiliar, and thus stimulate a new way to talk of the phenomenon. Such a perspective is close to the thinking of Richard Rorty, who has argued for the necessity of keeping an "ironical" attitude towards the vocabularies we use to make sense of the world, and strives to break with both the metaphysical notion that activities have simplistic and essential natures, and the egoistical idea that the spirit of research is somehow to be found within the mental states of the researcher herself (see Rorty 1989).

A recasting of this kind would of course best be achieved if we could totally break with the accustomed principles of sense-making, and create a sort of vertiginous aporia that would force us to rethink the very foundation of the thing we are reflecting on, or the very possibility of such a foundation. However, this is seldom possible. Not only is the creation of such fractures fiendishly difficult, but the nature of this process is such that the better one crafts such a recasting, the less likely it is that it will be understood and comprehended. We are thus caught in a double bind – truly important reflections will not be seen as reflections, whereas comprehensible reflections will always, to a degree, be plagued by their triviality. Consequently, any attempt at reflexivity needs to reflect on the issues of vanity (*Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas...*) and triviality, realizing that these will always play a part in the act thereof.

This said, the following will be an attempt to reflect on (social science) research by recasting it. I will here discuss the economic nature of research, arguing that this admittedly simple recasting can still shed some light on the complexities of the research life. Now, by discussing research as an economical activity I do not wish to reduce it, even though there is an aspect of the self-evident to this, but rather want to point out some of the processes that exist in the background of even the most reflective research. Whereas most analyses of research look to the social and personal aspects thereof, it is quite astonishing to realize that little attention has been paid to the economic nature of research, particularly if we by "economic" mean something more complex than simple analyses of transaction costs or similar hackneyed models from economics. Thus, the following analysis of the academic draws primarily on economic anthropology, and attempts to place research activity into a more social framework of exchanges. Starting from a discussion of research as a hybrid economy, the paper will cover issues such as the commodity-nature of contributions as well as gifts and sociality in research. The paper will conclude with some remarks regarding the economic nature of reflection in the social sciences, and the aporia created by the notion of academic life as defined by hybridity.

RESEARCH AS HYBRID ECONOMY

What I here wish to argue is that a central fact of research as a human activity is that it is driven

by both a generosity and a brazen calculative rationality, in other words that it represents a hybrid economy where gift-giving and post-industrial capitalism are merged and intermingled. Now, the idea that research has an economic side is not new, and there exists a large literature of economic analysis of the research process. The putative field of "the economy of research" can be said to have been founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, who saw notions such as limited resources and efficiency in inquiry as paramount for the development of science. In this vein, we have throughout the 20th and 21st centuries had a constant production of cost/benefit-analyses and calculations regarding the economic benefits of research. Looking to the life of individual academics, this can for example be seen in the process of writing grant applications, where statements regarding the benefits of the proposed research is often given a prominent place, and a rhetorical analysis of such statements could probably generate highly interesting findings. However, none of this is pertinent to the argument that I attempt here. This hinges instead on the fact that the economic behavior of the individual academic engaging with the science community cannot be reduced to one single economic system, but that we instead must conceptualize a hybrid economy to make sense of it.

Hybridity in the sphere of the economic is a concept that has been suggested by a number of authors. The most developed notion may be that suggested by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, see also Yang 2000), where hybridity is presented as an analytical alternative to the common assumption that capitalism represents a completely penetrative and all-encompassing imperialistic function. Rather, they argue that in order to understand economic systems we have to relinquish the idea of stable and total such, and instead study the fluid intermingling of various systems. For instance, in her study of economic behavior in Wenzhou, Mayfair Yang (2000) shows how people from a predominantly rural society engage in capitalist production with a gusto, only to use their accumulated wealth in a ritualistic economy where one for instance quite literally burns money (actual, material bills) at burials and in other ways squander and waste this surplus (cf. Bataille 1967/1991). Here, two economies with fundamentally different structures do not simply co-exist, but intermingle and reinforce each other – capitalist production enables and aids the function of the ritual economy, and this again drives people to greater engagement with capitalism. To state that this economy "in reality" is one or the other would be to miss the very point of how it has been established and how it is performed. Instead, Yang argues that this is an example of a hybrid economy, one that has to be understood not through reduction to one of its forms or by claiming that it exhibits some set fraction of a specific form. Rather, it is the very intermingling of different logics that defines this economic nexus, a kind of a third space (see Bhabha 1994) for the economic where the limited models thereof are shown to be unteneable. Further, a hybrid is always already an impure monster (cf. Douglas 1966), as its internal logic is that of inherent contradiction and performing a paradox. This does not, however, invalidate it as an analytical category, as it is

this very aporia that can be used to explain specific logical flows not reducible to efficiency or other mono-logical concepts.

The central claim of this paper, then, is that academic work can be understood as a hybrid economy. And whereas there is much discussion about the social and socio-psychological aspects of life within the ivory tower, there is little similar reflection on the economic aspects thereof. These aspects are, however, integral and central to academia, even though we often out of ideological reasons seem to marginalize them. To refer to economic aspects seems to be to debase the research life, and although one would think that organizational scholars would be the last people to assume that a reference to economic life by necessity means a reduction, this still seems to be the case. The reason for this is easily deduced. Although it is well known that the notion of the economic cannot be reduced to merely a caricature of bourgeois capitalism, there still exists an assumption that we by a reference to the economy are talking about one of its facets, namely that of the idealized market. At the same time, economic anthropology, among several other disciplines, has for (at the very least) the last 30 years (see e.g. Sahlins 1972, 1976) operated with the assumptions that the economic is a complex manifold, where several potentially conflicting logics work in concert to structure exchange. Thus the claim that recasting a phenomenon as an economy would here not refer to a reduction but rather to a contextually constituted system of exchanges that can be structured in a number of different and complexly aggregate ways.

Looking at academic life as an economy, we can state that this at the very least consists of three interlocking economic spheres: a gift economy, a social economy, and a market economy. Taken together, the irreducible complexity of these spheres intermingling constitutes academia as a hybrid economy. While it is not possible to delimit behaviors therein as purely being part of one or another, the three spheres do however help us to create at least a tentative order of economic behaviors. We shall therefore treat them in parts, even though this should be understood as merely a simplification and a kind of epistemological shortcut. After considering these three constitutive parts, we will return to the issue of hybridity.

Claims that academia is a gift economy are not unheard of, and in fact seem fairly prevalent (see e.g. Hyde 1979), particularly if more polemical statements are taken into account. The way in which scholars are prepared to engage with this concept could be understood in a number of ways – such as a strive to portray oneself as a moral being and as a political move used to position academic work outside of the demands of the market economy – but it also shows a critical aspect of how exchanges work within academia generally. The traditional definition of a gift economy (see e.g. Mauss 1924/1990, Berking 1999, Godelier 1999) describes this as an economic structure where gift-giving is seen as the most characteristic form of exchange, i.e. one where the gift rather than the priced commodity is seen as the default unit of economic action. In such a structure, we normally assume that economic behavior is chiefly ordered around three functions/re-

quirements: the necessity of giving, the requirement to receive, and the need to reciprocate (see e.g. Mauss 1924/1990, Rehn 2002). In classic gift economies, such as the potlatch (or to use Chinook jargon, *patshatl*) and the *kula*, this meant that in order to be a member of society, one had to give specific ritual gifts, likewise accept gifts given, and that all gifts had to be in some way reciprocated (see Derrida 1992 for a critique). This created a circulation of gifts and counter-gifts which defined the economic nexus for the societies engaged herein. When we refer to academia as a gift economy we are invoking something similar. Much of what is produced in a university is given away, so that e.g. important research findings are distributed through the academic journals without the scholar receiving any monetary compensation. In fact, we are so happy to give away our findings and/or opinions that we celebrate when we've managed to efficiently give away some by publishing it. Of course, when we do so we acknowledge (receive) similar gifts given by referencing important contributions and the likes, and our new publication can thus in a way be seen as a form of reciprocity. Keeping just to the process of academic publishing, we can read this as a kind of ongoing spiral of gift-giving, where every member of the community continuously both gives, receives, and reciprocates. The element of gifting in academia can be manifested through a number of channels, with publication being just one, but this is an illustrative example. Much of what goes under the label of academic work is arranged as a process of gifting (advice, results, references, findings, and so on), and this means that we at least in part can talk about academia as a gift economy.

This can be contrasted with another structure, one I'd like to call the social economy. Whereas the gift economy is structured by way of symbolic entities, a social economy is organized through relations. This distinction, which is very tenuous, should be understood merely as an orienting device, but it may enable us to discuss some of the more intangible aspects of organized economic behavior in academia. We can start by exemplifying. All active academics will at some point undertake some reviewing, and active senior researches will often be inundated with such engagements. This will entail everything from the relatively simple job of refereeing articles or books, to the more arduous processes of assessing thesis manuscripts or, in a worst-case scenario of sorts, assessing the work of several prominent scholars who have applied for the same chair. This is of course hard work, and normally it is done either *pro bono* or for a nominal fee not in line with the work entailed. What is interesting here is that the smooth functioning of academia requires and presupposes that people will commit themselves to such work, even though it is clearly not in the immediate best interest of the individual. Clearly, there is an element of *quid pro quo* here, so that I will in part take on work due to the fact that I know I will need similar favors in the future (e.g. securing people to appraise doctoral students), but this does not fully describe this operative logic of favors. We could instead say that our continuing existence within the field of academia requires and builds on certain social processes that will form our

behavior within it. The requirement to devote oneself to the craft and take part in certain jobs regardless of their pay-off is an integral part of academia, and thus in part constitutes what could be called its economy. The difference to the gift economy may seem tenuous, as favors of the kind discussed here could be understood as a form of gifts (cf. Ledeneva 1998), but I contend that within the structure we are discussing, there is a difference. Whereas gifting is tied to a productive logic, wanting to gain in standing, reputation, and honor, the social economy is built on more of a reactive mode, where we will be prepared to take on irksome and arduous tasks because not to do so would seem callous or shameful. The social economy thus refers to the ways in which social forces such as peer pressure or tacit demands can order activities in ways that cannot be reduced to the restricted understanding of the economic. A somewhat trivial point, perchance, but important when re-considered in the context of hybridity.

Referring to gifts and the social can however also work in a way that masks the existing market structures of universities. Whereas it is clear that there is an aspect of gift-giving and social relationships to scholarly work, we cannot be blind to the fact that there is also a very tangible market structure to academia. In a situation where an increasing amount of particularly junior academics and post-doctoral researchers get by on short-term financing, and where competition for grants, positions and tenure are fierce, it would be naïve to discount such a fact. Still we often fail to acknowledge how e.g. publications and academic activities in fact constitute a form of currency, and further something that can conceptually be treated as a scarce resource. As getting an article published in a prominent international journal can have a tangible and measurable effect on things such as career possibilities and even salary, the market economy of academic work cannot be discounted. In fact, it would be fairly easy to describe the activities of a scholar as direct utility maximization, if one was so inclined. Articles form commodities, traded on one market (the journals) for publication points, which can then be used in negotiations on another market (work opportunities). But as this seems a very harsh way to view e.g. scholarly publishing, we usually ignore these aspects. I will not here detail the market properties of university life, as I assume these are mostly well known, merely point to this third economic sphere and move onto the issue of hybridity.

My argument, as previously stated, is that economic activities within academia must be considered, but that they cannot be reduced to one single conceptualization of the economic. Instead, in order to form a reflective understanding of academic economy, we must deploy a complex set of understandings, which in their turn could build on the notion of academia as a hybrid economy. Within the structure that has developed over the ages, there co-exists a number of logics which cannot be understood in isolation, and these logics can thus be interrogated only in part as solitary phenomena. Rather, they must be understood as fundamentally intertwined into each other, so that the gift-nature of an academic publication must be understood both through

this specific nature and also, at the same time, through their place in the social structure and the market economy of the university system. This is the logic of the hybrid, that we can only understand phenomena in parts, and that we at all times must pay heed to the dialectical flow within which our understandings are constituted. By saying that academia is a hybrid economy I am stating that my understanding of its economic nature is one of irreducible complexity, and that we must be able to deploy several, inherently paradoxical logics to make sense of it. On one level, we are of course making sense of it simply by living it, and our embodied sense of academic life is well equipped to take care of these matters. But when we start to talk about reflecting on our academic practices, we cannot simply refer to such embodied understandings, but must instead deploy more overt explanations. Here hybridity can help, and I will in the following use the logics I've tried to outline in order to make sense of two things: the status of contributions and the economic logic of reflection.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND REFLECTION AS COMMODITIES

An issue often raised among social scientists is that of the "contribution". Sometimes this refers merely to a ritualistically repeated question in seminars, where words such as "contribution" or "epistemology" are bandied about simply to divert attention from the fact that no-one is actually talking about anything remotely sensible (you know who you are), but despite this the issue does have something of interest to it. When we contribute, we clearly do something more than simply write a text or suggest something. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin *contribuere*, which means to pay tribute together. A tribute, again, is an offering. Originally this meant something paid to a ruler or figure of power for protection (often from the power itself), but has later begun to be understood as any offering, even a most symbolic one of praise, so that we can pay tribute to a beloved colleague or to a rock band. Observing the communal nature of many such tributes, the social cohesion implied in the notion of con-tribution thus strengthens the aspect of sacrifice and the "common good". A contribution is not merely something brought to the party, it is a question of partaking in a shared activity, a public function.

It would be easy to psychoanalyze the obsession with contributions in organization studies, as this clearly is a symptom of lack – lack of cohesion, lack of community and the ever-present desire for completion (cf. Žižek 2000). At the same time, as the preoccupation with this phenomenon is so clearly an aspect of the social order of academia, it seems that ascribing it merely to such a psycho-pathology would be too simple. Instead, we have to note how contributions are something beyond gifts, and how they stand as overdetermined signifiers of the academic condition. Whereas we in the iterative process of ongoing publication of research can find traces of a gift economy, the moral category of contribution can be said to represent a more deep-rooted

sense of academia as a community, and the economic structure this imposes. The publication, read as a gift, carries the name of the author and thus brings honor to her. The contribution, however, is in part an offering, a necessary show of sacrifice that has to be understood as a form of ritual relinquishing of identity and immersion into the greater community. When we give, we stand as individuals taking part in a structural exchange, but when we exist as contributors we appear as parts of a defining whole – truly social.

The social nature of contributions determines their standing in the economy of academia, and they represent the fact that the social life-world of research is one which can never be complete – there can never be closure and thus never an end to the activities. This requires of the participants to in part abandon their own standing and accepting that the greater project supersedes the individual ones. In part, we can even state that the academic economy by necessity is socialist, as the individual works gain their standing by the way in which the further the aims of the community at large. Thus, references to the “contribution” of a specific text or specific researcher is a way to state that in order to gain exchange-value on the academic market (merit counted towards e.g. career advancement), one must first establish that it has use-value within the social economy. Obviously this can be perverted insofar as such a use-value may well be gained merely by bolstering the social standing of others (epigonic works, toadying, reinforcement of egos), but from a structural viewpoint this makes no difference.

Using the concept of hybridity, we can thus say that the contribution may start out as a gift, but in order to realize its economic potential it must also be accepted within the sphere of the social economy as something more (or, in a manner of speaking, less) than a gift. If this succeeds, the contribution can then be turned into something that can be treated as a commodity on a market. Obviously, this description suffers from the fact that it treats these processes as serialized, so that one leads to another in something akin to a chain reaction, when we should be saying that these three processes are simultaneous and enmeshed, but it will suffice for now. The hybrid nature of contributions further shows us something about reflection. Whereas reflection is often viewed as an intrapersonal process, the social nature of reflection as a contribution signifies the way in which reflection must in fact be socially accepted in order to be viewed as reflection. This again problematizes the nature of academic reflection by casting (i.e. reflecting) this as partly an economic process. We will now turn to this last part, the commodification of reflection.

If we turn our reflective gaze not on research or researchers, but rather on reflection as a function in the aforementioned, we can note some things about it that might otherwise be obscured. Specifically I here want to note some things regarding the moral economy of the concept. Normally, the discourse of social studies posit reflection as an upstanding and honest activity, characterizing a good researcher. We could even say that there exists a form of “moral coinage” in research, so that the invocation of specific modes (reflection, critique, dialogue et cetera) are

seen as the mark of a morally aware and upstanding researcher, *prima facie*. Reflection, in and of itself, is seen as a good thing. Speaking from a perspective of logic, this is of course highly irrational. On its own, reflection is meaningless, an empty ritual. It can only gain meaning by being contextualized, by existing in a relationship with something. Still, this does not mean that reflection cannot be engaged with as an object (indeed, I am increasingly thinking about academic reflection as a Lacanian *objet petit a*), i.e. as a commodity. Such a view would emphasize not reflection as a relation, but as a signifier deployed for economic reasons.

Referring back to my previous point about the market economy of the university, the use of reflection in the social sciences could succinctly put be understood as a restricted economic action, as e.g. an utterly logical move for *homo academicus oeconomicus*. In a situation where the deployment of reflection is seen as having the function of improving one's chances to get published – and thus secure a job, get promoted and/or get a raise – it ceases to be a mode of thinking and turns into a commodity that can be peddled on the academic market. The moral coinage of reflection is thus not unrelated to more mundane forms of coinage, and the seemingly humble confessional could be studied as the peddling of vanities (or in the case of editors, peddling indulgences). When we see to the increasing interest thereof, or more to the point, the increasing popularity of publishing texts on it, we may in fact be viewing a reaction to market demand – or a case of supply-side economics.

Such a perspective does not invalidate reflection in the social sciences, but it does problematize the moral stance we often take. By noting how reflection, or more to the point publishing texts ostensibly about reflection, does in fact have clear economic consequences, we might in fact keep a more reflective stance on it all. As it is apparent that there are scholars who have made their entire career by extolling reflection, publishing on reflection, and fostering whole cadres of similarly reflection-touting acolytes, to deny the market function at play here seems to be the fundamentally unreflective thing to do. In this way, a perspective on academic work which draws from economic understandings and a sensitivity towards the composite and hybrid nature of social being can be used to show otherwise ignored aspects of assumedly pure activities, reflection being one.

Thus I feel we can state that reflection, today, is not only an upstanding process of re-consideration of epistemological bias, but also contains things such as brazen careerism, avaricious motives, and even purely automatic and dogmatic calls towards a ritually constituted concept which may be incomprehensible outside of the social locality it is glorified in. Such an understanding will of course be viewed as callous cynicism, even in the technical sense (cf. Sloterdijk 1983), but I would insist that it is also a case of realism. Even if we can agree on the ethical impetus for reflection, to ignore these less wholesome aspects of it, ones we are in fact engaging in, would be a dogmatism unworthy of a considered academic life. In order to think our thinking

through, we must also pay heed to those frameworks which may make such considerations paradoxical and contradictory, and thus accept the conflict of thinking.

IN THE END, APORIA

One of the important aspects of hybridity is that it by necessity constitutes conclusions as an aporia. There can be no clear conclusions in a state of hybridity, as the very nature of the monster is one of irreducible conflict. We cannot present a final word, as hybrids never can reach a final, total state. But this is true of all kinds of existence, and this is why an engagement with hybridity is necessary. Life can well be understood as a continuous internal contradiction, and the marvel of social life lies not in the few moments of consensus, but in the fact that this aporia does not condemn us to eternal doubt (cf. Sloterdijk 1983, Žižek 1993). Rather, we seem more than happy to live our lives with logical disjunction, and even revel in the paradox of social existence.

And reflection is a case of specifically such a contradiction. When we engage in reflection we seemingly turn inwards to understand the world, but this turning inward can only be comprehensible in the context of a social group of researchers who comprise the consumers of such an experiment in solipsism. We could further state that although the field of e.g. organization studies has been interested in reflection in organizing, it is oddly unaware of the organization of reflection. Even more peculiar is that the economic nature of academic work seems to be a blind spot, a lacuna, a case of the Žižekian Real. Whereas we as social scientists are quick to analyze economic agency in others, we often fail to acknowledge the same processes in our own behavior (*Redde Caesaris quae sunt Caesaris...*). And this blinds us to many of the complexities of the academic life. Rather than viewing our own behavior as fundamentally economic, we are more than happy to engage in the fantasy of pure reflection.

But the alternative to pure reflection (which is always a one-way affair) – reflected reflection – instead creates something more akin to a prismatic effect, one where the certainties of moral goods (*sic*) are cast in doubt. Such an approach does not work by casting light, but by paying heed to the numerous light-effects, the shadows, the changing patterns and interlaced effects. It delights in the *moiré*-patterns and odd optic effects of the non-continuous reflections created by natural light in unnatural circumstances. In the same way, a study of the economic that builds upon the notion of hybridity will not go looking for casual explanations or reducible models, but instead explore the *jouissance* of economic miscegenation and mutation, the marvels of mixes and fluid dynamics. By doing so, we can not only explore the intricacies of social life in a less reductionistic way, but also find a path towards a post-moralizing social science, one where the easy agreements have to give way to greater awareness of the ideological underpinnings of our

actions, and the politicized nature of even that which on the surface seems morally uncomplicated. And then, possibly, reflection might be able to break with reflection, escape its current ethos of guarded self-control, and truly become emancipatory... ■

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