

The Critical Presence of the Other:

Comparative Philosophy, Self-Knowledge, and Accountability

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Abstract:

Western philosophy has traditionally taken justification as necessary for constituting genuine knowledge. On the contemporary scene, however, several influential epistemological theories (Gadamer, Polanyi, Kuhn, Sellars) see the project of epistemological transparency as undermined by the fact that implicit conditions necessarily underlie our explicit knowing. In this paper, I argue that “we” must engage non-Western traditions of thought, if we are to remain committed to justifying the conditions of our knowing. To put it differently, philosophical accountability requires discarding the delusion of self-critique and coming to recognize our dependence on the critical distance provided by Other-traditions.

This paper argues for the importance of cross-cultural philosophy, but not, however, on the basis of socio-political or moral grounds.¹ Rather, my argument is essentially epistemological. I contend that Western philosophy cannot become fully cognizant of its deepest presuppositions without seriously engaging Other-traditions of thought. To put it differently, philosophical accountability and responsibility requires discarding the delusion of self-sufficiency and

coming to recognize our dependence on the critical distance provided by Other-traditions.²

This is not to say, however, that good arguments cannot be made from moral and socio-political standpoints. My concern is that such arguments too often take the form of a plea aimed at Western philosopherø to recognize their *duty* to extend consideration to Other-traditions of thought or they may contend that Western philosophy *owes* such an extension of consideration to Other-traditions. Both cases, however, preserve the implicit assumption that Western philosophy is self-sufficient and thereby free, even if morally obligated, to extend such consideration. Secondly, ethical arguments, more generally, it is virtually impossible for such moral considerations to get any traction when confronted with an unrepentant egoist. To be sure, I am not claiming that Western *philosophers* are egoists as such, but that Western *philosophy* represents a kind of egoism.³

1. Egoism and Self-Sufficiency

Egoists are self-absorbed and self-centered. An egoist is someone that has an inflated sense of self-importance, often reflected in their tendency to speak or write about him/herself to the exclusion of all others. This exclusion of others need not be a conscious decision, but it does reflect an exaggerated faith in oneø self-sufficiency and autonomy. The egoist does not see him/herself as dependent on anyone else in any nontrivial way, that is, in ways that he/she projects as significant. This is the øbad faithø of the egoist: the failure to fully and sincerely acknowledge wherein his/her dependence lies.

The dominant Western conception of philosophical reason has believed that it can fully explicate the grounds of its

own beliefs through rigorous and critical self-examination. I believe that this conception of reason is fundamentally inadequate and, secondly, that there are good reasons *internal* to the tradition for believing it to be implausible. Indeed, it is the coexistence of these "good reasons" alongside a continued faith in the ability of reason to achieve self-transparency that is the source of what I take to be philosophy's bad faith.

2. Reason, Critique, and Self-Transparency

Let me begin by explaining what I take to be the dominant conception of philosophical reason by returning to what is probably its "purest" instantiation, namely, the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁴ In the first critique, Kant proposes a method "transcendental logic" for achieving the complete transparency of reason. In the "Preface" to the first edition, he writes:

And it is to call to reason to take on once again the most difficult of all tasks—viz., that of self-cognition—and to set up a tribunal that will make reason secure in its rightful claims and will dismiss all baseless pretensions, not by fiat but in accordance with reason's eternal and immutable laws. This tribunal is none other than the critique of reason itself: the *critique of pure reason* (CPR A xii).

Through the process of "critique," Kant aims at understanding the *conditions* of our understanding, and thereby to understand the *limits* of our understanding. The interesting aspect of this Kantian project is that the task of the critique falls to reason itself. From the very outset, then, one might suggest that such a project rests on a fundamental conflict of interest—especially, when the purpose of such a critique lies

in disciplining reason, and thereby ensuring that reason remains within the scope of its legitimate reach. For Kant, this reining in of reason is required if we are to make the philosophical enterprise *accountable*.

Obviously, my claim that the Kantian project of the first critique rests on a *conflict of interest* is only partly serious, but it is worth considering what we mean by such a conflict and why we object to situations involving a conflict of interest as a matter of policy. Crudely stated, a *conflict of interest* refers to a situation in which someone is directly involved in two or more projects with competing, and possibly incompatible, demands wherein he/she has a personal stake in at least one of these projects. Our anxiety about such conflicts concerns an alarming lack of *distance* between the self and its interests. We recognize that this distance from the self has a positive function, namely, it is the condition for the possibility of critique and accountability.

3. Attention and Distance

If we consider the problem from a phenomenological standpoint, it becomes clear why distance is required for critique. When we are engaged in any familiar activity, which is to say an activity in which we are *at home* so-to-speak, that activity is directed towards a relatively determinate object or field of objects. In other words, every activity has a focus. For example, hitting a baseball is directed toward the ball as its focal object.⁵ This basic relationship between an activity and its object concerns what we might call *first-order* attention. Notice, however, that this first-order attention concerns a focal object that is immanent or internal to the activity itself. We are simply *absorbed* in the activity at hand.⁶ This is why someone like a hitting coach can be so

important. A coach takes a "second-order" perspective on our first-order attention, that is, on our activity. There is a very real difference between the object of our coach's attention and the object of our attention. We are attending to the ball, while our coach attends to us. We cannot be truly absorbed in our activity *and* taking a second-order perspective on that activity. Strictly speaking, then, since an activity is defined in relation to its object, we cannot attend to the proper object of our activity and to our activity, because the change in object, that is from a first-order to a second-order attention, denotes a change in activity. That is, we have lost the desired object of our attention in the very shift of attention.⁷ Here, I would like to shift attention to Plato's presentation of the "Ring of Gyges."

4. The Ring of Gyges and Anonymity

In the second book of the *Republic*, Glaucon introduces the myth of the "Ring of Gyges," which has the power to make the one who wears it invisible and thereby beyond the purview of authorities and social reproach.⁸ The ring represents freedom from the conventional moral constraints through which, as Glaucon says, "[self-advantage] is forcibly diverted to paying honor to equality" (*Rep.* II 359c). Thus, it is under the supposition of this radical anonymity (invisibility) that one of the essential questions of the *Republic* is posed: Does justice belong to the highest class of goods, which are those goods that are desirable for their consequences and, even more, for their own sake *or* is justice only desirable because of its consequences?

However, it is Adimantus's comment with respect to the relation between invisibility and justice that I take to be most interesting. He says, "no one is just of his own will but only

from constraintö (*Rep.* II.360c). Considered in its utmost generality, this ðconstraintö refers us to the social, that is, to the Other in the guise of either formal institutions such as law or informal institutions such as social stigma. The issue at the heart of the myth of Gyges is the fundamental tension between *anonymity* and *accountability*. In anonymity, one retreats from social relations and thereby withdraws from accountability. However, it is not simply that one evades prosecution, formal or otherwise. Indeed, I contend that the evasion runs even deeper.⁹

By dissolving one's relation to the social, anonymity enacts an evasion of one's self. In this primordial sense, then, anonymity removes the condition for the possibility of accountability. To fully understand why anonymity accomplishes such a dual evasion, it is necessary to turn to Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of ðshameö in *Being and Nothingness*.¹⁰

5. Shame, the Other, and Accountability:

Sartre asks us to imagine a scenario in which we are motivated by jealousy, curiosity, or vice, to listen to a door and peer through its keyhole. Because our jealousy motivates and organizes this activity, Sartre contends that we do not *know* ourselves as jealous, but that in a very direct sense we *are* jealous. By this, Sartre is pointing to the fact that we are glued to the spectacle on the other side of the door. We are, quite simply, engrossed. As Sartre puts it, our consciousness ðsticksö to the act; there is no ðoutsideö to our activity of eavesdroppingö that is until we are seen:

But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall.

Someone is looking at me! [í] First of all, I now exist as *myself* for my unreflective consciousness.

It is this irruption of the self which has been most often described: I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me (BN 260).

For Sartre, the Other de-centres my grasp on the world, and draws my attention to my self. It is as though the ring of Gyges slips off my finger. The Other shatters my anonymity and wrenches me into accountability. She discloses aspects of my being that can only be revealed *Otherwise*, that is, a plane of self-revelation that necessarily depends on being-seen by an Other. According to Sartre, I am *recognized*, which is to say that in being seen, stripped of my invisibility, I lose the shelter of my anonymity and am rendered vulnerable. The Other introduces an exteriority, an outside to my activities, and thereby reveals me *as I am*. It is in the eyes of the Other that I come to *know* my self *as I am*.

On Sartre's analysis, anonymity is not merely a way of escaping censure by Others, but, more importantly, it allows us to escape *into our activities* and away from our selves. Anonymity, therefore, not only removes the distance between self and Other, but also expunges the distance between consciousness and self-consciousness.

Like Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas argues for the necessary presence of the Other for constituting our own relation to ourself. In fact, Levinas makes several scattered remarks specifically addressing the Ring of Gyges. He suggests that "Gyges's ring symbolizes separation,"¹¹ which is to say that invisibility, or what I am calling anonymity, severs our relations to Others. Moreover, he too connects this anonymity to an exemption from responsibility:

But does not Gyges's position involve the impunity of being alone in the world, that is, a being for whom the world is a spectacle? And is not this the very condition for solitary, and hence uncontested

and unpunished, freedom, and for *certitude*?

[Italics mine]ö (TI 90).

Note though that even for Levinas such anonymity is connected explicitly with ðcertitude.ö To retreat from engagement with the Other is one means of securing certitude. But this certitude is merely a subjective position; it is, by definition, a *pre-critical relation* to one's belief. Such certitude is not the achievement belonging to beliefs tempered by critique, rather it is a naïve and dogmatic certainty that repudiates the very conditions for the possibility of critique: it is the antithesis of the ideal to which philosophical reason aspires. The irony, however, is that this is the state in which Western philosophy finds itself, because of its general negligence with respect to *its* philosophical Others. However, before simply condemning the current practice of Western philosophy, let us examine, more closely, the epistemological role of the Other, that is, the significance of the Other for our own self-knowledge.

6. Risk, Prejudice and Accountability

In his masterwork, *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer struggles to understand the process by which we come towards understanding.¹² In terms of its basic orientation, then, *Truth and Method* recollects the project of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The real difference, however, concerns Gadamer's focus on history and tradition as supplying the conditions for understanding, rather than the Kantian focus on ðreason's eternal and immutable laws.ö A central piece of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics concerns the positive role that *prejudices* play in bootstrapping our understanding:

öThe historicity of our existence entails that

prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world.¹³

According to Gadamer, prejudices, by which he means something akin to presuppositions, premises, and hypotheses, allow us to initiate the process of understanding. If we were simply blank slates without anticipations, without any means of orienting ourselves towards experience, we could never begin the process of understanding. To put it quite crudely, to see anything at all we must be already looking in some direction.

This does not mean that there is no distinction between good and bad prejudices, that is, between prejudices that clarify our experience of the world and those that obfuscate the world. The problem is that we cannot separate *in advance* the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstanding [italics mine] (TM 295). Moreover, what is most interesting for our purposes is that since our prejudices are the conditions for understanding, they constitute the blind-spot of our understanding. In other words, the relationship between prejudices and understanding parallels our earlier discussion with respect to first-order and second-order attention. That is, *while* our prejudices are integral to the activity of understanding, they cannot be candidates for our understanding.¹⁴ Thus, while we can be made aware of some of our prejudices, particularly those that are relevant to localized domains of understanding, our most fundamental prejudices, which are those that function most globally and are basic to almost all of our experience, are virtually invisible.¹⁵ This is why Gadamer places so much importance on our dialogical engagement with the Other:

ÖIn fact our own prejudice is properly brought into

play by being put at *risk*. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself [*italics mine*]ö (TM 299).

To fully appreciate Gadamer's conception of "risk," or what he calls here "full play," we must return to our previous analysis of Gyges's Ring.

In that analysis, we saw that impunity is a consequence of anonymity (invisibility), while accountability is a consequence of being-visible. In Gadamer's language, risk denotes the sense of being-held-accountable for one's prejudices that accompanies any genuine engagement, which is to say any being-visible-for-the-Other. Gadamer writes:

Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do soö (TM, 361).

Notice that my openness as such cannot be coerced, I cannot be forced to be open to the Other in the same way that we cannot force Gyges to be visible. However, once I am open (visible) to the Other, I am already accountable, which is to say, "I *must accept* some things that are against me."

Rather than a simple sense of physical visibility, our focus has now turned to engagement¹⁶ or what Levinas calls "participation":

Participation is a way of referring to the other: it is to have and unfold one's own being without at any point losing contact with the otherö (TI 61).¹⁷

Within the framework of our discussion, and for Gadamer, this participation (read: comparative philosophy) means fully exposing our claims to truth and fully recognizing the Other's claims to truth, because it is only through such

mutual vulnerability that our respective prejudices can be made visible to the Other, and thereby visible to us.¹⁸ As with Sartre, it is the Other that reveals me *as I am*. Epistemologically, then, the Other has a vantage point on our prejudices that is, for the most part, unavailable to ourselves. For us, the Other is *critical distance*. This is why the appearance of the Other is the event of being put into question. It is what Levinas refers to as the *critical presence of the Other*, a presence that *will call into question this egoism* (*TI* 119).¹⁹

While the model of these various analyses—Sartre, Levinas, and Gadamer—presume an interpersonal dynamic, it is my contention that we should not understand them as simply person-relevant, but also as tradition-relevant. In other words, the encroachment of the critical-presence of the Other can and should occur across traditions of thinking. I believe that a commitment to comparative philosophy marks just such an openness towards *our* philosophic Others, and a repudiation of anonymity. It follows, then, that such encounters have the capacity to rupture the egoism of the Western tradition and provoke a newfound *accountability* and, most importantly, a critical awareness of our cultural chauvinisms. By making it possible for the Western tradition to take account of its deepest prejudices, I believe that this accountability entails an expanded sense of *epistemic responsibility* (1) with respect to truly *owning* the presuppositions of our theorizing, namely, a self-conscious *appropriation* of our heretofore *unconscious* prejudices and presuppositions, and (2) with respect to the *limits* of our philosophizing. However, despite Kant, we cannot achieve such a genuine critique within the confines of our own tradition. We are not self-sufficient, but rather we need to recognize our dependence on Others, that is, *if* we are going to fulfill the philosophical project as it has been conceived. In other words, the very conception of Western philosophy, and in particular our conception of knowledge as requiring *justification* re-

quires that we open ourselves to non-Western thinking and cease being invisible.²⁰

End Notes

¹ This is not to say that there are no moral implications entailed by this argument, but that it begins from epistemological premises rather than moral/political premises. Secondly, the premises of this argument are purely internal to the western tradition, that is, it does not presume a previous engagement with non-western traditions in order to argue for continued encounters with non-western traditions. I see these two features as necessary constraints on any argument attempting to gain purchase on the kind of *ōgotismō* embodied by *ōWesternō* philosophy as it is dominantly practiced in both Continental and Anglo-American circles.

² Although it goes beyond the scope of this paper to take up in detail particular examples of philosophers that have achieved deeper levels of epistemological transparency, and thereby a more critical relation to their own tradition via such engagements with Other-traditions, let me simply suggest that Heidegger's encounter with the Sino-Japanese tradition provided the requisite critical distance for Heidegger's reflections on thought, metaphysics and language. Moreover, the work of some contemporary thinkers in philosophy of mind, who have challenged the traditions' assumptions about the dependency of cognition on representation—most notably Francisco Varela and Jay Garfield—have relied heavily on non-western sources. It is also interesting that other thinkers in the philosophy of mind that come closest to the positions of Varela and Garfield have taken Heidegger as something of a starting point, i.e., Hubert Dreyfus, Robert Brandom, and John Haugeland.

³ Throughout this paper, I will be using the term

philosophy to refer to Western academic philosophy in both its Continental and Anglo-American flavors. Moreover, for rhetorical purposes I will be presenting the Western philosophy as a monolithic tradition, which is admittedly something of a misrepresentation. However, one must admit that the tradition is highly unified in its fundamental negligence with respect to Other-traditions.

⁴ Kant, Immanuel. (1996). *Critique of Pure Reason*. (Werner S. Pluhar, tr.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing; hereafter indicated as *CPR*.

⁵ This characterization of the ball as the focal object orienting the act of hitting is clearly a simplification, but the basic point does not require exploiting this simplification.

⁶ From an everyday standpoint, we even speak of ourselves as getting lost in our activities. This loss of the self denotes the loss of self-consciousness as a dominant mode of attention, and thereby describes a shift to a nondualistic mode of attention. This lack of rigid separation between the self (qua self-consciousness) and its situation is also responsible for the change in our perception of time. Time flies when your having fun expresses the fact that conscious attention to the passage of time (qua passing) depends on a mode of reflection separating the self from that by which one gauges the passage of time.

⁷ Having said this, I am sure there are those who would object and say, "But I have had experiences in which I am engaged in an activity *and* aware of how I am engaged in it!" Of course, we have all had this experience, particularly when we are learning a new skill. However, this division or, more precisely, this rapid oscillation of attention betrays the fact that we are *not* absorbed in the activity, and as such it represents a problematic relation to the activity: *either* we are learning something new *or* struggling with an activity *or* made conspicuously aware of our activity by being watched

(i.e., most of us can relate to the emergence of a newfound awkwardness in adolescence, which surfaces in routinely unconscious activities such as walking, when we are suddenly thrust into self-consciousness by the presence of eyes to which we assign special significance, i.e., those extraordinary eyes belonging to that boy or girl with whom we are smitten.). In other words, our attention flits between the ball, the feel of the bat in our hands, and our stance, because we are just learning (or relearning) to hit, because we are in a hitting slump, or because Others are watching us.

⁸ All citations of the *Republic* are taken from Paul Shorey's translation as it appears in: Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Eds.). (1989). *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁹ Contra Plato-Socrates, I am in agreement with Adimantus, but for different reasons. While Adimantus understands *ōconstraintsō* as something strictly external to the self (law or social disapproval), I am arguing that even self-constraint (or self-restraint) requires a relation vis-à-vis the self that can only be constituted by our primordial relatedness to Others.

¹⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1956). *Being and Nothingness*. (Hazel E. Barnes, tr.). New York: Gramercy Books; hereafter indicated as *ōBN.ō*

¹¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. (Alphonso Lingis, tr.). Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 173; hereafter indicated as *ōTI.ō*

¹² Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (1999). *Truth and Method*. (2nd Revised Edition). (Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, tr.) New York: Continuum; hereafter indicated as *ōTM.ō*

¹³ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (1977). *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. (David E. Linge, ed. & tr.). Berkeley: University of California, 9.

¹⁴ My use of *õwhileö* is meant to highlight the temporal dimension of this process, that is, it is precisely *when* certain prejudices are in effect in rendering experience articulate that they cannot themselves be made articulate.

¹⁵ Here, I am thinking of such things as primitive cognitive metaphors (see the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson), basic metaphysical and ideological assumptions (see the work of various deconstructionists), and fundamental grammar and syntax belonging to certain language-families (see Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger^ö and possibly Noam Chomsky re: generative grammar).

¹⁶ Obviously, my use of anonymity extends beyond the absolute anonymity of *õinvisibilityö* to include relative modes of anonymity such as *õaloofnessö* or *õdetachment.ö* These latter modes concern the kind of anonymity people often enjoy in large cities versus the *õvisibilityö* accompanying life in a small town.

¹⁷ I suggest that Levinas^ø conception of *õparticipationö* provides a particularly good model for conceptualizing and practicing comparative philosophy.

¹⁸ The irony is that we (Western philosophy) need Other-traditions more than they need us, because of the fact that our conception of knowledge views *õjustificationö* as a necessary condition. My basic claim is that given this model of knowledge, we can only genuinely achieve *õjustification,ö* in any rigorous sense, by becoming cognizant of those deepest prejudices supporting our beliefs.

¹⁹ This quotation from Levinas returns our attention back to egoism and its relation to anonymity. There are a number of ways in which egoism expresses itself as anonymity: 1) self-absorption, that is, being wrapped up in oneself is a withdrawal from Others, and 2) false extroversion, that is, those that appear to engage Others may only use their engagement with Others as a means for relating back to themselves.

²⁰ From its outset, Western philosophy has gathered its orientation from the Socratic project. Occupying the very centre of this project is the injunction "Know thyself!" Thus, philosophy as the "love of wisdom" seeks self-knowledge as its primary objective, while the concrete examination of one's life becomes the means for realizing this goal. As the telos of philosophy, self-knowledge is not merely an instrumental end, but the source of the good itself: the value of our lives surfaces in relation to the process of examination. Hence, Socrates' claim "The unexamined life is not worth living." This is not to say, as Nietzsche does, that for Socrates life is *given* value by knowledge, but that the implicit value of life can only be made explicit in and through examination, that is, in self-knowledge. This self-knowledge is not the mere extension of knowledge as such, but a sharper realization of the distinction between what we know and what we do not know – this is the Socratic conception of wisdom. It is an accurate account of *who we are*. For Socrates, then, self-knowledge through critical examination is how we are to *care* for our selves. What I have tried to argue for today is that our caring for our selves cannot be separated from our caring for Others – that our knowing ourselves cannot be separated from our knowing Others.