From 'Self' and 'Other' to 'We'

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I. Philosophical narcissism

Alas! I myself am the boy I see. I know it: my own reflection does not deceive me. I am on fire with love for my own self. It is I who kindle the flames which I must endure. What should I do? Woo or be wooed? But what then shall I seek by my wooing? What I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor. How I wish I could separate myself from my body![1] [Ovids account of the story of Narcissus]

My plan for this first year of Gresham lectures was to explore the philosophical framework best suited to understanding and relating different religious cultures. Last term I explored two central concepts in philosophy - truth and knowledge - and made some suggestions about how we might view them in this context.

Tonight I want to begin the exploration of something that is fundamental, if often unconscious, in Western philosophy the Self, and therefore what is not my Self: The Other. But I want to do this using a concept borrowed from psychology. This could have a peculiar, or even provocative result. The concept I want to use is narcissism. I would like to consider whether there might be such a thing as philosophical narcissism. Then I would like to consider whether there is an alternative!

The words that Ovid gives to Narcissus are so fruitful for an investigation of philosophical narcissism that we can practically take them for a set of criteria. There are three points in particular to observe: the desire to take oneself as ones own love-object I am on fire with love for my own self; the desire of narcissism to eliminate the body How I wish I could separate myself from my body! ; and the curse of lacking nothing What I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor.

To take oneself as ones own love-object may be a very unconventional way to describe the philosophical thought-experiments of works like Descartes Meditations and Husserls Cartesian Meditations. But these works share the feature of exploring the nature of human reflection and knowledge through an investigation of ones personal consciousness. The thinker stares into the mirror of his own thought to understand what thinking is and how it happens. One is the recipient or patient of ones own professional work a surgeon couldnt do this. And moreover, it is interesting that those thinkers who do this, Descartes and Husserl pre-eminently, are those most concerned with objectivity, with providing a secure foundation for philosophy. So the workings of ones own mind must be reliable guide to human minds as a whole. One cannot then be individual or unique, unrepresentative, or subjective.

It is not only interesting that they take themselves as their own object. It is also worth noting which aspect of themselves they take: they are thinking things.

The Austrian thinker Ferdinand Ebner designated such thinking the dream of the mind. A dream seems like reality, but I am not really present in the dream as I am in real life: I watch myself as an observer, I am not actively engaged. Therefore my true being does not really come to the fore; and in nowhere is my being less certain than in dreams, no matter how certain a dream is of its own reality. According to Ebner, what decisively characterises this kind of thinking is a lack of personal engagement. The I in the I think of such philosophy is not the real I, but an idea. It is the I for whom nothing is serious, he writes. In opposition to the dreams of the mind, Ebner places the seriousness of existing. For Ebner, all Western ideal ist think ing, from Plato to Hegel, and even Nietzsches will to power, suffers from this lack of commitment.

In Ebners view, if we consider ourselves as that which thinks, we can only make ourselves into an object the plaything of our own thought. This makes my whole existence dependent on my thinking activity; but it is not really me. So Jacques Lacan plays on Descartes famous cogito ergo sum, I think, therefore I am, in this way: I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think. ... I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think.[2] And yet even when everything else about our personhood is (allegedly)stripped away, leaving behind only a thinking thing I still am. I still am even where I have apparently deconstructed myself in my own thinking process, I still remain as the hidden subject, the agent who is carrying out my own personal agenda (however hidden), which may not be anyones elses which may then not make me an objective and certain foundation for philosophy. While I as object of investigation is submitted to intense scrutiny, I as subject carrying out the investigation escapes unexamined.

So paradoxically I still am. The one thing that is not doubted or examined is that I am a separate, independent self who can engage in this process. ...The philosophical cogito is at the centre of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself, and even in the mistrust he has learned to practise against the traps of self-love.[3]

The other week I heard my colleague Anne Primavesi, an environmental theologian, ask Why is it that we refuse to accept our earth-centredness? I also want to ask: Why is it that we refuse to accept our body-centredness? For it has to be said that the thinkers most inclined to the style of thinking I am describing are also inclined to downplay or ignore the importance of the body. I think the reasons for both these refusals (of the body and the earth as fundamental to our being) must be linked, or perhaps identical. Philosophical narcissism suggests an answer.

What must be presupposed in such thinking activity is a kind of separation from ones body. It requires a distinction, (in thought at least) between oneself as a thinking thing and oneself as a bodily thing. Such an approach almost requires the so-called mind-body problem. Such distinctions between myself as a thinking thing and my body and actual presence make possible the having of oneself as ones own object, all the while remaining the knowing subject; it allows a kind of philosophical bilocation.

Narcissus cries, How I wish I could separate myself from my body! You may have been surprised that I (or Ovid) suggest that it is narcissistic to desire a separation from ones own body. Casual notions might imagine narcissism to be a worship of ones own body, rather than a desire for bodilessness. But is it not both? With the I identified not as the one who is in the body, but the one who is looking at it and wanting it? For the body is what makes us separate from the one who is beloved; it separates oneself from another who is desired. Narcissus wants to remove himself from his body in order to make it the object of his desire, and not the desiring subject; to be something out there he can have. He can only desire and gain the object of his desire if it a body other than himself.

But also, the abolition of the body would eliminate the otherness of the Other and the selfness of the self. For bodies are what make us separate. And if we are not separate, we can be merged. And then we will not need anything, or anyone, else. Thus to achieve its ends, narcissism must not only abolish the Other, but also the selfness or subjectivity of the self, and finally the body. We can detect these three traits in

philosophical narcissism as well: first, a focus on a single knower or subject of philosophical investigation a subject who is therefore at once his own object (abolishing the Other); second, the claim that I represent objectivity (the annihilation of ones selfness or subjectivity); and third, a concomitant devaluation of the body. Fundamentally, perhaps, these three are one: to wish to annihilate the body is to desire the overthrow of all limitation, to be all things, total in oneself.

What Ebner calls deficient modes of being, which one could say appear both in psychological and in philosophical forms, are all characterised by the denial of the need for another. Ebner calls this the sickness unto death. The self withdraws itself from dialogue with others and closes itself off from others. In the supposed purity of thinking of myself only, I think that I can have disposal over myself; while the movement of dialogue entails an Other whom I cannot control. The movement of closing myself off from you means that I can seem totally independent. This he calls the objectifying of being[4] which thinks that being is something one can control.

Epistemological narcissism wants to abolish lack and constitute oneself as ones object. But the words of Narcissus point to the danger (ultimately fatal, for Narcissus) that this refusal of need leads to. My very plenty makes me poor! he mourns. Narcissus possession of himself prevents him from lacking his beloved in order to meet his need by gaining his beloved. What shall I seek by my wooing? What I desire, I have! such unhappy words!

All three characteristics of philosophical narcissism make such a philosophy eminently unsuitable for inter-faith dialogue (or, I would suggest, any kind of dialogue). First, in approaching another faith, one cannot take oneself as ones own objectobviously, as we are trying to understand someone else. But I mean that in a deeper sense. So secondly ones own thinking cannot represent others; one cannot take ones experience as the basis of objectivity. We must seriously consider how different others are, as I repeatedly stressed in my first lecture. And even if we are seeking a kind of unity or at least solidarity, this cannot be achieved by insisting that we are all the same, despite the differences in appearance. For appearances are important. So thirdly, to take the body seriously, as I am suggesting we should, means in this context realising that the body is more than skin deep. It may not house the same thoughts, feelings, and values that I have in a different format. The ethical challenge, however, is to accord these different views respect even though they are not mine.

II. Self & not-self

Now I want to make things even more complicated and confusing, by asking: How reliable are our notions of what is my self and what is someone else? And how do they arise? I will do so with reference to four different accounts.

When you look at Western philosophers writing about knowledge, the distinction between me and not-me or in me and out there isnt always where you would expect it to be.

When Immanuel Kant examines consciousness, the content of our knowledge, he proposes a Copernican Revolution in the theory of knowledge. Instead of fitting the solar system around the earth, we should make the earth with the other planets revolve around the sun. This Copernican revolution in the theory of knowledge was to suggest that instead of making our knowledge conform to objects as they are, we should assume that objects must conform to our knowledge. Knowledge of objects then to some extent involves knowledge of the conditions of our mind. We can know things in so far as they are subjected to certain prior conditions of knowledge on our part. Our mind imposes this form of cognition on the ultimate material of experience. Our minds then construct the object of knowledge, and what we cannot do is step outside this capacity of ours in order to see things as they really are, apart from how they appear to us.

Freuds early account of the me and the not-me comes in his description of how the infant forms its notions of itself, with a metaphor which anyone who has tried to feed a baby would recognise. The original self, which according to Freud is guided and determined by pleasure, wants to introject the good and cast out the bad. One owns or swallows the good and disavows or spits out the bad. What is good is in me, is me; what is bad is not me, and is out there. Thus is born the distinction between inside and outside, which according to Freud is not a primary datum of experience: what is bad, what is seen as alien, was originally part of oneself; now however, all the bad and negative is projected outward, while the good is introjected to form an image of ones self. So the notions of in me and out there are not original; but in this account, they are not terribly accurate either, as at least some of the bad more properly belongs in me and not out there. We see the adult continuation of this in Freuds famous defence mechanisms, such as projection, in which we attribute feelings or thoughts we find unacceptable to others rather than to ourselves.

So in Freuds account, two things have happened at this point: the original creation of an inside and outside oneself; and secondly attributing properties to them.

Out of the infantile self that is governed by the Pleasure Principle, grows a self who is governed by the Reality Principle. Now the self asks not merely what feels good, but what is real. Again, it is a question of inside vs. outside the self; but now it is not a question of whether to appropriate a quality inside, but whether those things are out there or not, and above all, whether I can master them according to my requirements.

The opposition of the self and the other, the subjective and the objective, what belongs to the subject who is knowing as opposed to the object of knowledge, does not exist from the beginning therefore, according to Freud. This distinction arises only through the ability of thinking to make something perceived present again through a representation when the object is no longer present. So Freud depicts us as checking our representations, the picture in our awareness, against real perception, to find it again, to convince oneself that it is still at hand.[5]

It is interesting to observe both Freuds dependence and divergence from Kant here. Both Kants and Freuds starting-point is an alleged awareness of a representation in ones consciousness; its possible existence outside the mind being a separate question. Freud, in identifying the contents of consciousness as a representation, imports an entire theory of knowledge from Kant. A representation is the picture I make of a thing. The use of the word representation, in other words, signals that we cannot take for granted that we experience things directly. Rather, it implies that what we think we perceive of something is the picture we make of it ourselves, which might well be inaccurate. Freud could have simply said perception instead of representation, and by implying that we are perceiving, rather than constructing, what is around us, he would have suggested an entirely different theory of knowledge and of the world. In other words, Freud tacitly accepts from Kant that we cannot be sure, even in our knowledge of an object, what is coming from ourselves and what is the object. Where Freud differs from Kant is in thinking we can check the world to see how right or wrong we are. Kant doesnt think we can do that. [6]

Both Kant and Freud think we construct many aspects of our knowledge of what is not ourselves. But Freud thinks the very distinction of inside and outside is in fact a construction of the subject, and not itself a given, as Kant assumes. Indeed, in Freuds account, the outsideness of the outside is false: what is seen as alien is (or was) in fact initially part of oneself. So in Freud the differentiation between self and everything else is not so absolute or original as Kant maintains. The apparent confusion about what is and isnt oneself points to two things: first that the distinction of self and other is not clear, psychologically or philosophically. Secondly, this confusion is not merely fundamental to psychological functioning but also to philosophical or epistemological functioning. Finally, in so far as it is fundamentally a confusion, it also points to the fundamental role of mistake, misrecognition, or error in the creation of the concept of the self.

The confusion gets worse.

Lacan, like Freud, also tells a story about the formation of the subject, but in his account the infant recognises and misrecognises her own image in the mirror like a little Narcissus. The baby sees herself as an Other, outside herself and adopts this form she sees as me. Which is true and not true; as the image is indeed of herself, but is not herself. It is her image and not identical with herself. This Lacan describes as the origin of the ego[7]; it is formed by this cycle of beholding an image, identifying with it, assuming it into oneself, then projecting oneself outward again.

Looking at her image, the baby becomes aware of herself as a body but Lacan describes this as the empty form of the body. What is within one can only learn to recognise by inversion, by its inversion in the Other , he says. Only by projecting it out onto another image can one begin to recognise what is in oneself in other words, misrecognise, as long as it is ones own.

In Lacans account of the mirror stage, self and not-self are the same thing: the image one sees is oneself but is also out there, therefore other. This is the soil in which narcissism can flourish: the confusion over the identity of the image plus the desire for the image together allow one to make oneself the object of desire. As a moment in development, this absence of differentiation between me and not-me is inevitable.

After the mirror-stage, Lacan speaks of a see-saw in which desire and identification swing back and forth like a pendulum between the child and another. The child wants what he sees, and wants to be what he wants. There is an unstable mirror between the child and his fellow being, as Lacan puts it dryly.[8] The toddler describes his own assault on a companion, in all sincerity, as: He hit me! The child decides who he is by identifying with another, but also by learning to modify that identification.

In Lacans account, in contrast to Freuds, this see-saw with the Other is what introduces the notion of inside/outside, by making us aware of the form of our bodies. But in a greater contrast, what we learn from Lacans account is the indispensability of the Other in the origins of the notion of the self. The formation of the image of the self and the formation of the image of the Other proceed together, hand in hand.

From social psychology comes some new observations; Professor Ervin Staub has developed an account of social, cultural and psychological origins of group violence. They form an interesting complement to these pictures of the individuals confusion over self and other.

Staub describes the way that harsh life conditions can lead to mass violence and even genocide. One important ingredient is how people identify themselves and others as members or not of a valuable group; how they perceive the other, and what attributes they confer on them. I will quote Staub extensively since nothing can be gained by paraphrasing him, so concise and clear is his style (which cannot be said for Kant, Freud and Lacan).

Certain ways of seeing and evaluating events and people require no physical action…, but they help people satisfy at least the psychological needs and goals that arise from difficult life conditions. Some of these internal processes are basic psychological tendencies common to all human beings: differentiation of ingroup and outgroup, us and them; devaluation of those defined as members of an outgroup; just-world thinking, which is the tendency to believe that people who suffer, especially those already devalued, must deserve their suffering as a result of their deeds or their characters; and scapegoating, or blaming others for ones problems. …

Blaming others, scapegoating, diminishes our own responsibility. By pointing to a cause of the problems, it

offers understanding, which, although false, has great psychological usefulness. It promises a solution to problems by action against the scapegoat. And it allows people to feel connected as they join to scapegoat others. Devaluation of a subgroup helps to raise low self-esteem. Adopting an ideology provides a new world view and a vision of a better society that gives hope. Joining a group enables people to give up a burdensome self, adopt a new social identity, and gain a connection to other people. …

The cultural self-concept of a people greatly influences the need to protect the collective psychological self. A sense of superiority, of being better than others and having the right to rule over them, intensifies this need. Collective self-doubt is another motivation for psychological self-defence. When a sense of superiority combines with an underlying (and often unacknowledged) self-doubt, their contribution to the potential for genocide and mass killing can be especially high.

Nationalism arises partly from this combination of superiority and self-doubt. One form of nationalism is the desire to enlarge the nations territory or to extend the influence of its values and belief system. …

Societal values can embody a positive or negative evaluation of human beings and human well-being. But even in societies that do value human welfare, an outgroup my be excluded from the moral domain.

Us-them differentiation is a basic human potential for which we even carry genetic building blocks. It is one source of cultural devaluation. Negative stereotypes and negative images of a group can become deeply ingrained in a culture. The needs I have described are often fulfilled by turning against such a preselected group. Its members are scapegoated and identified as the enemy of the dominant groups well-being, safety, and even survival, or as an obstacle to the realisation of its ideological blueprint.[9]

I would extract this lesson from Staubs analysis: the formation of identity not only of the individual self but the shared identity of a group, and its perceptions of the Other as a group, plays a crucial role in our treatment of others. What that means is that the business of self and other is a powerfully ethical issue; one that impacts on the most urgent, life-and-death questions of the moment.

In very different ways, Lacan and Staub give us a picture of how we create and maintain our identity in interaction with the Other, whether as individuals or as groups. But one result of their analyses, different though they are, is this: that our perceptions of the other are conceived in interaction with our notions of ourselves; they rest on the possibility of mistake and misattribution of what is inside and what is outside.

In our context, of the relations of faiths in a multi-faith world, it is interesting to find Staub writing:

A monolithic, in contrast to a pluralistic, culture or society is another important precondition [for mass violence]. In a monolithic culture there is limited variation in values and perspectives on life. In a monolithic society strong authority or totalitarian rule enforces uniformity. The authorities have great power to define reality and shape the peoples perception of the victims. Societies with strong respect for authority also tend to be monolithic, and this combination makes adjustment to social change especially difficult.

In a pluralistic society with varied conceptions of reality and greater individual self-reliance, people will find it easier to change and gain new perspectives and accept new customs and mores. Reactions against initial harmful acts are more likely to occur and to inhibit the progression along the continuum of destruction. [10]

III. Beyond Narcissism?

What we have seen is that in theory our notions of what is my self and your other are not as simple as they seem, and concretely they seem frequently to rest on a mistake. This is due of course to the now-familiar problems of how inaccurately we perceive ourselves. In a lecture last term I cited Jean Hippolyte: I am going to tell you what I am not; pay attention, that is exactly what I am.[11] Now we can add the next step, the misperception of others based on our poor recognition of ourselves, and this time I will quote a Jamaican proverb: Every time you point a finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing at you.

But this problem of making mistakes is also due to philosophical problems of knowledge and perception. It also rests on certain assumptions about what selves are anyway. We can see the Western assumptions about individual selves more clearly, of course, by taking a brief look at a different cultures metaphysics. From the perspective of certain strands of Indian thought, this whole problem I have been discussing seems misconceived.

Some schools of Indian thought do not believe that there is, at the deepest level, a distinction between my self and your self. In Vedantin thought, the fundamental reality, Brahman, is not differentiated in this way; there arent, ultimately, lots of separate independent selves. It is the product of ignorance to think that my atman is a completely separate thing from your atman, or from Brahman. To become enmeshed in a problem of my Self and how it relates to you as Other is a waste of time, but is also worse than that.

The Buddha was revolutionary in rejecting the idea that there is an atman of this nature at all. The belief in a self is the deepest and most obstinate delusion of all.[12] The Theravada Buddhist doctrine of anatta (no-self) is complex, resting as it does on a complicated analysis of the person, but Ill sketch it like this: the perceptions, sensations, thoughts and feelings, consciousness that we have do not add up to an Ego, a Me, a thinking substance that possesses them, nothing of a permanent duration. This is not mine, this is not what I am, this is not myself.[13] The belief that there is a permanent self is the ultimate cause of suffering, according to the Buddha.[14]

In both these traditions, seemingly maintaining opposite views about the self, there are some shared insights. The first is that mistakes about a self are the most fundamental and intractable mistakes we make. Secondly, our cherished notion of an independent and self-subsistent self are delusive. Third, whether you think there are selves or not, neither the Vedantin nor the Buddhist think that this is what defines me over against you. Fourth, to realise the truth about what my self is not is precisely how I attain enlightenment.

One does not necessarily need to accept either of these frameworks in their entirety to profit by acquaintance with them. I have begun to suspect that The Self (which then gives rise to the problem of The Other), is not necessarily the most fruitful foundation to build upon for philosophical or religious reflection. What if the basis of philosophy was We rather than I, or the relationship rather than subject vs. object? This is what I want to explore in other lectures.

Johann Georg Hamann proposed a different understanding from Descartes caught ergo sum, I think therefore I am. Not Cogito; ergo sum, but vice versa, and more Hebraic: est; ergo cogito.[15] This does not simply reverse the order of being and thinking: Hamanns suggestion is not sum ergo cogito. Est, ergo cogito: it is, therefore I think. It is not solely my existence which is the foundation of thought. What comes first is the worldall that is. Only because it is, can I think. The thinker exists first in a larger context; that of the whole of creation.

If the philosopher no longer leaves the world out of consideration, but even as a thinker remains a person among persons, then thinking cannot be a monologue; it becomes a dialogue between I and You. The

notion of the Other as constitutive of ones being undermines Descartes concept of the subject. I cannot speak of myself, reflect on myself without a relation to You. The Other then becomes essential to all philosophical reflection. As Hamann says, if we proceed on the basis of Est, ergo cogito, the whole system might receive another language and direction.[16]

In the next two lectures we will go further with these possibilities of how the inter-faith philosopher might best be, in every sense, a selfless person.

References

[1] Narcissus in Ovids Metamorphoses, translated by Mary Innes, London: Penguin Books, 1955, 86.

[2] Jacques Lacan, The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud, in Écrits, translated by Alan Sheridan, London: Routlege, 1977, 166. [Hereafter Lacan, AL.]

[3] Lacan, AL, 164

[4] Ebner, Ferdinand, Werke, Vol. I, 255.

[5] Sigmund Freud, Die Verneinung

[6] Even if you interpret Kants transcendental idealism as embodying a fairly reliable empirical realism, (therefore one in which our representations are not imagined as substantially different from the real world of things) one still could not compare the real world of things apart from my perceiving it to the representation or perception of it.

[7] Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I, translated by John Forrester, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, 165. [Hereafter Lacan, I.]

[8] Lacan, I, 169.

[9] Ervin Staub, The Roots of Evil. The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, passages from pp. 16-19.

[10] Staub, op. cit., p. 19.

[11] Hippolyte, Jean, Commentaire parlée sur la Verneinung de Freud, La Psychanalyse 1, 1956, 29-40. Reprinted in english translation in Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I, translated by John Forrester, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, 291. NB in that prior lecture, The truth is in between, I absent-mindedly ascribed this quip to Lacan himself; it is in fact Hippolyte in dialogue with Lacan.

[12] So Nyanaponika Thera, cited in Lynn de Silva, The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity, London: Macmillan Press, 1975 and 1979, 17. This is an excellent source to consult on the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, along with Steven Collins, Selfless Persons. Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

[13] Anattalakkhana Sutta.

[14] Walpola Rahula writes: Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a Soul, Self, or Atman. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of me and mine, selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars

between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world. What the Buddha Taught, London, Gordon Frazer, 1959, 51.

[15] Hamanns Briefe, Vol. 5, Nr. 840, 448:26-28.

[16] Hamann, Ibid.