

THE OTHER WITHIN A SECOND-PERSONAL PARADOX FOR SELF- KNOWLEDGE¹

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I explore some consequences of Hilan Bensusan's arguments in favour of an indexicalist metaphysics and, in particular, of his discussions of the metaphysics of the others and of the paradoxical character of metaphysics. I suggest that, looking at the issue from an epistemological and moral perspective, the role that others play regarding our thought and, in particular, regarding our capacity for self-knowledge, opens up the possibility of embracing a paradoxical view of knowledge of oneself according to which I am, in some sense, at the same time an other to myself and not an other to myself. This paradox may be behind what sets apart self-knowledge from knowledge of what is external.

KEYWORDS: Bensusan's indexicalism; Levinas; Self-knowledge; Second-person; Love and Knowledge

Hilan Bensusan's indexicalism is the claim that the basic furniture of reality is constitutively indexical, everything points towards something else, everything makes reference to something exterior to itself. What is outside always remains outside, but through deixis it also remains near and is welcomed by means of perception. Everything points to other things, everything is pointed by other

¹ I am grateful to Jesús Palomo, Enrique Novi, Hilan Bensusan and Mar Muriana for being so close and so other over the years and forcing me to think these thoughts. This paper has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities under the research project PID2019-109764RB-I00, by the Regional Government of Andalusia under the research projects B-HUM-459-UGR18 and P18 FR-2907, and by the University of Granada under the excellence unit FiloLab-UGR.

things: everything perceives and everything is perceived, everything affects and is affected. Deixis and perception, though, involve an element of opacity. If pointing and perceiving were fully transparent, what is outside would be absorbed, the inner and the outer would cease to be bounded. The Great Outdoor would become a mere extension of the (Big or Small) Indoors. Furthermore, if reality were fully within the reach of our perception (of our thinking, of our practices), there would be an end to the demands that we receive by what we perceive and think about, there would be a place of permanent cognitive rest, a complete understanding of reality, an end to the challenges and interruptions that the others place in front of us. There would be no need to perceive or think anymore. There is already here an imperative that seems to go beyond the epistemic. The absurdity of a purely substantive view of the world, of a complete view from nowhere, not only implies the end of thinking, but also of acting and interacting. Once that everything became encompassed, there would be nothing left outside, but also nothing left to do. This image of thinking is problematic for a great number of reasons. It excludes error and, with it, it excludes merit. And, what is worse, it takes out of the picture what is crucial for thinking practices to develop: the encounter with what resists being swallowed by our present concepts and conceptions. If there is no other left to try to make justice of and justice to, there is no such thing as thinking, perceiving or acting. Such a static conception of thinking would only make sense in a world at zero Kelvin. Nothing would move, change or interact.

Eppur si mouve. It is cold out there, but not so cold. There is movement and interaction, everywhere. There is no fixed totality to be unerringly thought of once and for all. All-encompassing thought can only be of an inert totality and such thinking would not only cease to be a practice and would replace exteriority for totality, but it would also make interiority impossible. In contrast, we must keep perceiving, and changing our thinking and responding to what is asked from us. What keeps interiority alive is precisely the constant and never-ending interruption forced by what is outside and remains forever beyond the proper reach of thought.

In this short commentary of *Indexicalism: The Metaphysics of Paradox* I'll take the framework briefly summarised in the previous paragraphs as my starting point. For the purposes of this paper, I'll accept the whole package, although I believe that there may be other ways of making sense of the central theses of the

book: the relational nature of all there is, the impossibility of embracing the real within the conceptual, however construed, and the standing epistemic and moral obligation to respond to the friction from exteriority. What I will do is to explore some of the consequences for our understanding of self-knowledge of Hilan's insistence on the opaque and unembraceable character of the other and on the imperative to responding to its potentially infinite demands. In particular, I will dwell on the role that he gives to the ideas of Levinas, but changing the metaphysical focus for an epistemological one. And, in line with this shift of focus, I'll explore an epistemic paradox instead of a metaphysical one. Hilan argues for a metaphysical doctrine, indexicalism, which itself seems to imply the impossibility of metaphysics, a paradoxico-metaphysics. In analogy, I will explore a doctrine regarding self-knowledge that seems to offer a novel way of understanding its *sui generis* character while showing its limitations and, perhaps, its impossibility, a paradoxico-epistemology regarding knowledge of oneself. I'll need to transit through ideas that Hilan leaves unsaid in this book, but which has popped up here and there in conversations, papers, both co-authored with me and written on his own, and between the lines of the book itself.

I will start with Hilan's rendition of a crucial Levinasian axiom. There is an asymmetry between interiority and the Other: while what is outside interiority is and always will be an Other, I cannot think of myself as the Other of the Other. I will then combine this thought with a sketch of the role that the Other, especially the second person, plays in our cognitive and moral constitution and, in particular, in our capacity to know ourselves. Self-knowledge, if it is knowledge at all, must involve the possibility of error and the contrast of points of view regarding what I think, desire or feel. This could lead, or so I will argue, to the possibility of thinking of myself as an Other. That I need to look at myself from different positions if I'm to achieve self-knowledge seems to imply an excision, and a seed of exteriority within. I'm, at least sometimes, an Other to myself. I don't only metaphysically ignore much more than I know about the Great Outdoors, I also metaphysically ignore much more than I know about my own interiority: the Indoor may not be as great as the Outdoor, but there is always greatness to it (or, perhaps, they are just as great and this is another lesson from monological thinking not fully explored by the book). But, if we follow Hilan and

Levinas, I cannot think of myself as an Other to the Other. And yet, I'm an other of sorts to myself. This is the paradox: I'm myself's other and I'm not the Other of myself (the hesitation with the capitals tells part of the story).

I'd like to start by putting this idea in connection with some beautiful thoughts by Iris Murdoch on love and knowledge.

Art and morals are, with certain provisos which I shall mention in a moment, one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (...) Here is the true sense of that exhilaration of freedom which attends art and which has its more rarely achieved counterpart in morals. It is the apprehension of something else, something particular, as existing outside us. The enemies of art and of morals, the enemies that is of love, are the same: social convention and neurosis. One may fail to see the individual because of Hegel's totality, because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined. Or we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. (...) The tragic freedom implied by love is this: that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic, because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We have only a segment of the circle. Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness. (Murdoch 1959: 51-52)

These ideas run counter a great deal of assumptions in Western thought. Love, and generally, the affective, is an obstacle to knowledge or, at best, an external addition. This is particularly visible in the Modern distinction between cognitive and conative faculties, the latter providing motivation for action, the former making sure that action occurs in an objectively understood reality. Love is also an obstacle to morality: by focusing on the particular, by having special objects of attention, we lose the desired impartiality. The rejection of this broadly Kantian conception of morality is also a central topic of Murdoch's thought: morality has to do more with imagination and attention than with the will (1961, 1962).

The rejection of the 18th century philosophy of mind finds a particularly powerful expression, of much moral and political significance, in McDowell:

What I have in mind is an argument for non-cognitivism that goes back at least to Hume (though I shall formulate it in rather unHumean terms). It has two premises. The first is to the effect that ascriptions of moral value are action-guiding, in something like this sense: someone who accepts such an ascription may (depending on his opportunities for action) *eo ipso* have a reason for acting in a certain way, independently of anything else being true about him. The second premise is this: to cite a cognitive propositional attitude—an attitude whose content is expressed by the sort of proposition for which acceptability consists in truth—is to give at most a partial specification of a reason for acting; to be fully explicit, one would need to add a mention of something non-cognitive, a state of the will or a volitional event. Clearly, it would follow that ascriptions of value, however acceptable, can be at most in part descriptive of the world. (McDowell 1981: 212-213)

McDowell's way out is, much as Murdoch's (and as Levinas' and Hilan's) is to insist on the centrality of attention to the particular. He accepts the first premise while rejecting what we could call the "substantivism" of the second. Truth, within a totalizing view of reality, without any room for a separation between the inner and the outer, the same and the other, is restricted to cold descriptions of facts, totally barren of any value. Ideally, an outsider to our evaluative practices could give a full description of the world that matches our evaluative concepts without needing to countenance our particular viewpoint, the place from which we judge. Value is a mere projection of the subject's affects and this phenomenon should also be available for a neutral, substantive description by the relevant sciences. The political power of McDowell approach resides in its recognising the (cognitive) importance of perceiving and thinking about reality within an evaluative perspective. It is in line with the need to use morally-loaded concepts in our understanding of injustice and in our struggle to try to diminish it (Crary 2018). The moral significance is in line with the role that the Other plays for Hilan. Seeing others, from human others to all creatures big and small and beyond, as the book forcefully argues, as endowed with value is in itself a reason for action (where even doing philosophy may sometimes be the right kind of action). Seeing others that way, we have to respond to them. Love, as Murdoch argues, is an excellent way towards acting that way and perhaps a necessary ingredient. Respect for the loved one's otherness is a discovery of reality, for Murdoch, a recognition that something other than oneself truly exists,

that we never cease to discover them. These are infinite requests as the ones embraced by the indexicalism that Hilan offers us:

Rather than the idea that the Other is to be seen primarily as like me –the idea of symmetry– Levinas prefers the idea that the Other is superior, asymmetrical and external to what I am. To be sure, I can take into consideration what I know about myself to understand the Other. This is not because my effort is to step into the Other's shoes, but rather because I understand the external as such only when I let the Other step into my shoes. Respect for the external is not to project me on to the Other but rather to let myself be infected by the external, by the stranger. (31)

What is it for others to step into my shoes? Part of the answer lies on the disposition to let what is external to me to constitute my thinking, to let my thought be affected by what is outside (p. 48). My thinking about what is outside as well about my thinking about myself. Interiority is fully exposed to what is around, to what is near and still outside. This is so both *de facto* and an imperative. Against the urge to fully comprehend others within the grasp of our concepts, there is a realization that our discovering doesn't have a resting place. We have seen different ways of putting this point in Murdoch, Bensusan, McDowell and Levinas. Our perception of others in evaluative (grounded on love, for Murdoch, on metaphysical considerations for Hilan, on ethical ones, for McDowell and Levinas) and that, in itself, independently of any substantivist and descriptive ambition, is a reason to act towards them, to change our thinking, to respect their dignity as being real beyond our concerns.

But to let others step into my shoes also means reconsidering the nature of what I know about myself. To begin with, to take on board the extend to which what is external is constitutive of my own interiority. Others, especially close neighbours, friends, loved ones, have an authority not only regarding how I should respond to them, they also have an authority regarding how I understand myself. Amongst their demands, some have to do with forcing me to bridge the gap between what I believe regarding myself and what I express about myself in my interaction with them. They can correct my thought not only with respect to what is external, but also with respect to what is internal. Without external influence, there is no perception, no action, no thought, whether these are self-directed or oriented towards the Great beyond. But, if we accept that there must necessarily be a gap between what I would happily attribute to myself in the absence of external affection and what I display in my response to others, my

interiority may seem to place demands on me, perhaps demands that are a mere consequence of my obligations to others, but still demands that need to be answered. Without friction from outside, even self-knowledge becomes static. And, as we have seen, static thought is no thought at all. Self-knowledge needs error and correction, and error and correction again, indefinitely so.

I may not have the right to place on others the kinds of the demands I must accept from them but, if amongst their demands we include the demand to reflect on my own standing, if we really welcome such demands as constitutive of myself, I must approach my beliefs, feelings, desires and fears with some form of double vision. I must, at least partially, think of myself as never fully discoverable, as resisting any set of concepts that I may have at my disposal to make sense of myself. Even if only vicariously with respect to my interaction with others, I'm also a kind of other to myself. Once that I have acquired the capacity to recognise the inexhaustible reality of others, I also acquire the capacity of imposing an internal friction on myself. I may correct my self-understanding even in the absence of external pressure. What is it that forever escapes my conceptual grasp within myself?

We already have some of the pieces to rehearse an answer. Exposure, as a necessary condition for existence and for thought, implies changes in my interiority, not only on the way I think about myself, but first on the way I allow myself to be constituted by what is outside. How I express myself is often opaque to my thinking, mainly because others never cease to impress into me in unpredictable ways. And, if we follow the line proposed by Murdoch, Levinas or McDowell, if I don't see them from an ethical stance, they become invisible. To be receptive to others, to have one's thought and freedom articulated around their demands, is to perceive them as having a moral value, as in the premise that McDowell accept in the argument for non-cognitivism. To recognize their value, through love or through the general indictment to accept their otherness, is to recognize them as having an existence that is independent of our thought. This link between morality and acceptance of exteriority is possibly at the heart of the defense of moral realism or anti-antirealism that Murdoch and McDowell extract from their arguments. The reality of the other and its moral valence go hand in hand: the demands of what is external to us are presented as moral demands, not as purely cognitive demands with no practical consequences. Purely

cognitive demands would be satisfied within a full, substantive description of a totality. Demands that are simultaneously moral and cognitive (those that follow from rejecting the second premise of the non-cognitivist argument that we saw in the quote from McDowell) force us to respond.

Furthermore, the acceptance, with Levinas, of the opacity of the others is a moral imperative and that is precisely what it means for them to be real. Transparency leads to totality, as Hilan powerfully shows, and totality obliterates otherness. Inasmuch as we are also opaque to ourselves, we remain real too. My ever-changing interiority, a consequence of my exposure, is the drive of self-knowledge understood as a process.

Levinas' asymmetry between interiority and the Others should warn us about the role that we ourselves can play for their thinking. We can expect others to be impressed by us, to be hostage to change as a consequence of their exposure to us, even to modify their conception of themselves as a result. But we cannot demand such changes because they are not transparent to us, we never cease to rediscover them. We cannot aspire to fully know them and, much less, aspire to impose on them the way we understand them. We have to let them be, whether we want it or not. Even if we are fully receptive to being permeated by them, we cannot expect to step into their shoes.

How to think of the asymmetry between others' role for me and my role for others? As we pointed out before, self-knowledge, no less of knowledge of what is external to me, involves the possibility of knowledge and of being corrected. How do I correct myself regarding my own beliefs with respect to my interiority. How can I obtain the necessary distance from myself to realize that I am wrong when I attribute to myself beliefs, desires, intentions or emotions? How can I go through contrasting perspectives regarding myself on my own?

An answer to these questions could start from a Wittgensteinian thought Hilan echoes in his book: our tutors shape our thought, the lessons from others make my thinking possible. But there is no end to this phenomenon and it applies to our thinking in general, whether externally or internally directed: our thought keeps needing external constrain from others in order to be thought at all. "When you think like a hermit, you forget what you know", as the singer Will Oldham puts it in "New partner". We don't cease to be placed by others in a position that forces us to reconsider what we think about ourselves. Responding to that

challenge is as much an obligation towards them as an obligation towards ourselves. Those others which are closer to us are better placed, not just to know us, but also to get across their perspective on us. But, once that we have been introduced, first by our elders, later on by our dear ones, in the practice of questioning what we take for granted about ourselves, we seem to acquire the capacity to correct ourselves, if only from time to time (see Bensusan & Pinedo 2007, Brea & Bensusan 2006, Pinedo 2004). Others, especially as our second persons, don't need to be present to keep having an impact on our thought in general and on our self-image, in particular. They don't even need to be still alive. Letting them step into our shoes is, literally, making them part of our very thought processes, hand in hand with ourselves.

Should we expect to play the same role for them? Do we have the right to demand from them what we recognise as legitimate demands when they are made to us? Surely, amongst our compulsory responses to others is to tutor and guide them when they are under our wings, when we are bringing them up or are somehow responsible for the education. In that sense, we are sometimes expected to give content to other's thoughts, as in the Wittgensteinian image mentioned just above, in a similar sense as other's give content to ours. But our obligation to act as friction, to permeate their thought, extends beyond our role as teachers or educators. We, at least occasionally, are also expected to be sincere with our close ones, to place a mirror in front of them that could help them see things more clearly, especially as far as themselves are concerned. We are some people's second person. We are sometimes uniquely placed to offer the perspective with which to contrast theirs, to help them correct and expand their self-knowledge.

Levinas' asymmetry means that we should not impose our vision on them, that offering our point of view should not be something that we demand to be accepted, but rather a response to their needs, a gift that we should expect to be declined sometimes. We may not just give advice or show a different way of looking at things, we may have to act as our other's spoke-person, we may speak their mind with more precision or ease than themselves in certain contexts. We can contribute to them changing their mind in a way of other others cannot (facts don't change people's minds, friends often do) and we can also contribute to the expression of their interiority. Respecting opacity should be compatible with

offering insight into their mind. We cannot think of ourselves as their other, on pain of eliminating their otherness, their exteriority, of absorbing them within our sameness, of not letting them be. But we can contribute to their existence and make their reality richer. To offer oneself as a second person is risky: we may not be accepted and, if we are, we are always in danger of overdoing it, of obliterating the border between oneself and the other and, so, instantiating yet another temptation to totality (in this case, the Platonic totality of the mythical primordial unity of lover and beloved). Avoiding the risk means walking the line between being a total stranger and being an alter ego.

In this respect, it is interesting to say something briefly about Victoria McGeer's approach to self-knowledge in autistic people (2004). It is standard to assume that, given the strange character of the declarations about their mental life by persons with autism, they have a problem of ascribing to themselves mental states: their second-order states about their beliefs, desires and other first-order states are somehow wanting. If we adopt an expressivist approach to self-knowledge, the possibility of an alternative understanding of the difference between such declarations and those of people without autism opens up. Self-knowledge (and, in general, mental-state attribution) is not a question of scanning introspectively our inner life (or reaching, one way or another, other people's inner states), but of expressing our attitudes, our beliefs, desires, emotions or preferences through our actions and through our words. But then, we can make sense of the differences between people, not in terms of a void or incapacity, but rather in terms of their very unique singularity. This approach respects them as others, rather than as deficient versions of ourselves. It also allows for us to be directly, rather than descriptively, addressed by them. And, finally, it allows us to think about the constitutive limits of self-knowledge in the way that I will present to finish this paper.

Now we are ready to tackle our paradox, resulting from the combination of Levinasian asymmetry and the insight that we may, to some extent, be also an other to ourselves. As I have suggested, in virtue of our exposure to second-person interactions, both in our introduction into thinking and epistemic practices and during our whole life, we acquire the capacity to, using Davidson's expression, triangulate from different perspectives about ourselves. (We, as I just proposed, are also capable of playing that role for others, although, respecting asymmetry,

we must avoid invading their space and forcing them to see themselves either as part of our own being—a danger that is particularly present in an educational context—or as fully encompassed by our concepts and thinking.) Once that we acquire that capacity, we start to be able to feel our own resistance, our rebellion even, to be fully understood, fully grasped, even by our own thinking. This is the sense, resulting both from the capacity to correct oneself in her self-knowledge and from the resistance to be completely self-transparent, in which I can say that I am my other. Being surprised about oneself, painful as it can be, is a condition of possibility of thought and of self-knowledge. If self-knowledge were to end in complete inner peace it would also be the end of thought and the end of knowledge. As much as knowledge about the external, self-knowledge is a process, never a state. We also must, somehow, let ourselves be, let ourselves exceed in our being, in our being real, any understanding that we provisionally have about our mind. If we accept that it makes some sense to claim that I'm an other to myself and also Levinas' warning about not thinking of myself as the Other of the Other, we may have to say that I am, and I am not, an other to myself. This may be, or so I want to suggest, an unique feature of self-knowledge, one that may be central to accounting for its *sui generis* nature.

It may, for instance, be behind some of the most promising accounts of self-knowledge. I may be the only one capable of expressing my attitudes, my beliefs, fears and desires. But, at the same time, the attitudes I express may be out of line with the attitudes I attribute to myself. I may sincerely claim that I prefer Thai curry to paella, perhaps because I want to have an image of myself as a sophisticated, well-travelled person, or because I accept the judgement of those around me, or claim, offering my own reasons, resulting from my deliberation, that I do believe that a person's working-class or foreign accent is irrelevant when it comes to trusting them intellectually or morally, and yet act systematically in a way that shows that I prefer paella or distrust people because of their social identity. This gap between expression and self-attribution has been differently diagnosed as an excision of rationality (Davidson 2004) or as cognitive dissociation or dissonance (Borgoni 2015). Seeing it this way, it may seem a pathology of self-knowledge or of rationality. And, certainly, realising the existence of such a gap in particular instances should lead to reflection and self-correction, at least in those cases that involve the possibility of committing moral

wrongs (although, perhaps, regarding rice preferences, we could just follow Walt Whitman and celebrate our contradictions and the multitudes we contain). But the existence of the gap is part of the our very nature, of the inexhaustible character of our own interiority.

Or think of the idea of self-knowledge being privileged or, at the very least, different with respect to knowledge of others, as a result of being able to discover, through our own actions, who we are, what we want, what we hope for, what we believe (Roessler 2003). Such discovery would be impossible if we, in our self-reflecting role, were total masters of ourselves, if our thinking were all it is needed to appeal to in understanding our actions. But, as I have argued making use of the indexicalist framework provided by Hilan, if pointing is constitutive of being, if, furthermore, it always implies exposure to what we point towards, even when we point inward we are exposed to our resistance to be fully understood, fully accounted for, fully thought. To think of self-knowledge as essentially limited, as a never-ending process rather than a fixed state or a complete description of a totality, as a provisional achievement, at best, is a welcome consequence of the paradoxico-epistemology regarding self-knowledge that I have suggested that could be extracted from some of Hilan's ideas.

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