

# ESSAY

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TOPIC II

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"To know others is wisdom; to know oneself is acuity.  
To conquer others is power, to conquer oneself is strength."

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The fundamental problem about the self, the person, and humanity as whole and its place in the vast unintelligible universe has been provoking philosophical contemplation since ancient times, compelling speculators to ask themselves about their own identity, about what defines them as a separate human being, about what underlies their unique human nature. Such questions have not only epistemological but also ethical implications. As a thinking but also free-willed, acting, self-projecting being, one inherently cares about the world, about their own legacy, about their relation with others. The dynamic, the constant movement that comes with life necessitates this. People are not merely static creatures existing endlessly and aimlessly with unchangeable positivity (as Parmenides' concept of eternal Being lacking any movement), so their philosophical contemplation is not executed from the viewpoint of an absolute divine existence who only attempts to encompass the complex world in their consciousness. People seek correspondence between their internal and external world but that idea of *fit* goes both ways: we try to understand (so that our thoughts match the external), but we also try to change the very being-in-itself, so that it acquires an image we can *approve*, so that *it matches us*.

Thus, our attitude towards ourselves, others, and the world is rooted in the idea of belonging. We think about ourselves as our *own* selves; we consider others *our* family, friends, acquaintances, contemporaries; we embrace the spatiotemporal continuum as something filled with our own presence, something that can be filled in the first place, and that can be emptied once we vanish into nothingness. We look for meaning because it is important to *us* and when we can't find it we create it by changing political systems, by making technological discoveries.

These ideas are synthesized by Laozi's words in *Daodejing. A Philosophical Translation* which capture the inherent duality of what might be said to constitute a ubiquitous human nature by juxtaposing two key concepts in both academic pursuit and everyday life: the others and the self. In this essay I would first attempt to analyze this demarcation between one and their contemporaries from an existential and epistemological point of view. I would then



concentrate on the idea of knowledge by adverting to Plato and Immanuel Kant. Finally, I will proceed with focusing on the acts of conquering and possessing.

At first, the concepts of selfhood and otherness appear to be a very straightforward linguistic construct. All languages have evolved to have some way of self-referencing (whether that would be by using pronouns such as *I*, *me*, *my* or by modifying verb patterns and predicates). This clear distinction between what one perceives as their own beings and what they view through their eyes as being “other people” has numerous practical advantages as it allows clearer communication and helps us navigate the world in everyday situations. In its cognitive development a child learns to recognize that his or her identity differs from that of the mother, so, on a purely neuropsychological level, it seems that this distinction happens *a posteriori*. However, people are separate beings from the beginning of their lives as they all are bodies and as such they are physically aware of their limitations. Thus, on a more philosophical level one might speculate that such a linguistic and ideological distinction between the self and others occurs naturally as a way to divide oneself (as all that I have full access to and I can control) from all *that* which lacks such an accessibility, *that* which we can only observe from the outside and witness its surface, but also *that* which remains concealed and foreign to us, uncontrollable.

However, putting a line between selfhood and otherness as two qualities possessed by bodies is a simplified and incomplete view of their true nature as it only captures how they might appear, but not necessarily how they can be thought. For that purpose, one must try to examine them more closely. As it already became evident, this demarcation has its foundation in two key concepts: freedom and consciousness. The concept of self is the one whose inner world (consciousness) I have access to, and the one I am able to change according to my image and liking (freedom for self-constitution), while the concept of others is the one remaining inaccessible in both intellectual and physical realms unless given access to by the Other. However, what underlies that idea of others is the very concept of their existence. In everyday life one won't ask herself or himself whether others *are* in the world, but rather *how* are they in the world, what are they like, and how does that matter for the self. Therefore, in one's view of others as objects in the world, he or she has already acknowledged their subject nature. Other people are alive, they have consciousness, and they themselves perceive me as an object in their eyes. So in the very core of its meaning, the concept of others is rooted in the idea of likelihood rather than difference. To put it simply, others are like the self but also different at the same time. That's why we can agree with Jean Paul Sartre who would say: “Hell, that is the others” as the self feels inherently exposed and opposed to others throughout her life.

However, going back to Laozi's quote one might wonder: if others are entirely inaccessible how can even the wisest person have any true knowledge about them?

Semantically wisdom is defined as a result of experience. One gets to know others through communicating and spending time with them. But such knowledge is not merely fact-oriented. It is not complete once we are able to memorize the name, the age, the workplace or the height of a person. It is not complete either when we remember the events the person has experienced (their life from a historical perspective) such as the place of birth, their first words, previous occupations resume, etc. If that were the case, when asked people would all say that they *know* movie stars and rock singers. To know someone else is wisdom because it requires



personal experience with that person, and experience is not constituted solely by one's thrownness and facticity (by one's past and present). Experience is not objective time that has passed. It includes the presence of the self who is interacting with the world. And a person always carries the notion of their future in mind as they are constantly self-projecting by denying part of their essence and incorporating novel traits as essentially theirs. Therefore, having experience *with* someone else (or probably even *of* someone else) requires that one has the notion of the future of that other person, that one has reached the philosophical adeptness to understand the motivation of that other person when making their life choices. Such knowledge (understanding) would be of the highest order as it is abstracted from particular situations and carries an internal, universal value (*noesis*, in Plato's theory of knowledge).

However, one might argue that such knowledge is impossible on the basis of adverting to Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism. The imperfection of human senses makes it impossible to a person to form an image that completely corresponds to the world as it is independently from the observer. In Kant's notions, the phenomenal world is reshaped by our forms of sensibility, while things-as-such remain unintelligible as we have no knowledge of them since knowledge has its beginning from experience in the *empiria*.

It is true that one cannot have complete knowledge of others as having complete truthful undeniable knowledge is inherently impossible for the aforementioned reasons. However, as it became clear, one perceives others as intrinsically similar to one's own self. Adverting to Martin Heidegger, one is always and forever "being-with-others" as people are not isolated and lonely at one point to meet someone else at a later time. From the very beginning of a person's life, Dasein is always part of a world incorporating others and as such his inherently human experience cannot be separated from the nature of others and reduced solely to the characteristics of the self while leaving behind the entire world Dasein inhabits. Thus, the similarity between the self and the other allows the self to approach people by trying to be in their shoes, by trying to understand their profound nature through self-displacement. As that very action is repeated throughout life, it is an experience and therefore a function of wisdom.

Proceeding with the second statement made by Laozi, one needs to carefully examine the following problem: if all said is true and selfhood is completely accessible to one in terms of her ability to reason, remember, feel and make decisions, shouldn't one also be in complete awareness of oneself? Shouldn't one have undeniable and truthful knowledge of oneself no matter what?

When one claims that they know themselves, they refer to their identity. Once again knowledge is linked with experience and in this case understanding one's own self is a process occurring through actions and internal contemplation facilitating the degree and depth one can reach in self-assessment and self-awareness. In other words, people get to know themselves in two separate ways: one being the same mechanism observed in the relation to others and one being unique in the direct access to one's inner world. Therefore, being able to analyze one's actions from what they really are and how they can be interpreted by others requires once again displacement and is not something that comes natural to the self. However, while trying to understand others is a phenomenon occurring constantly in everyday



life, analyzing one's self is an emotional event that requires one to be objective and admit to their human imperfect nature. As such it requires the ability of *impartiality*.

Furthermore, one is used to refer to themselves and others as being complete opposites. However, as it became clear, one always coexists. Therefore, one is always influenced by otherness in his or her cultural, ethnical, moral, and social development. It is impossible to determine where original thought begins and where pure reason and foreign affect ends. In other words, when one refers to themselves they encompass all that they have been but aren't any longer, all that has been told to them and they have adopted as part of their worldview, and all that is common between all people (logos), that if not universal law is at least an intersubjective one shared by human beings as a whole. But the past, foreign influences, and evolutionary nature are phenomena beyond the scope of the self. They are neither intelligible, nor accessible, nor controllable. Therefore, such aspects of oneself turn out to be "filled" with otherness which poses the problem of self-awareness as much more complex and requiring a quality that goes beyond mere experience of oneself. Such quality might be called acuity as that captures the nature of the action: it is an ability which propels into self-reflection, and not an automatic or passive process that occurs gradually with time.

However, both of those problems are linked with knowledge which captures only one realm of human existence as knowledge is not only an end in itself but also a device, an instrument that allows people to make informed choices and act on their dreams. But incorporating one's will into the world in order to destruct and reconstruct is a process dependent one's strength and power. That is not a passive analytical process, but a dynamic act of freedom. People establish different attitudes to the diverse entities in their lives. Inanimate objects are merely used inasmuch as one has the physical ability to do so. That is not the case for other people and the self.

Others need to be overpowered so that they can be controlled. Such statement finds its argumentation once again in the nature of the Other who is a person having free will and the corresponding ability to act autonomously. Adverting to Friedrich Nietzsche, there is no such phenomenon as "unfree will". All people have a will to power, as that is an inherent human quality (one might argue it is even a quality characterizing life in general).

Conquering in itself is the process of making something your own. As people cannot be possessed as inanimate objects can, conquering a person refers to the action of ascribing characteristics of possessions to the conquered one. In other words, a conquered person would act according to the will of the possessor similarly to an electronic device or a wooden tool. Therefore, conquering others is a matter of domination (whether that would be physical, psychological or intellectual one). Paradoxically, such domination can never be absolute. As Georg Friedrich Hegel reasons, a master owning a slave is dependent on the slave herself since her identity of a master is possible because of the existence of the slave. Should the master decide to end the life of her perceived possession, she will be ending her own being as a master, as the very source of her power which lies beyond her person: the slave. In other words, one cannot simply have power. Power is always directed towards something or someone. The self can only have power over an entity, but removing the entity destroys the power itself.

Once again, considering self-control, or conquering of one's own self, raises the problem of otherness as quality contained within the self. Since selfhood is accessible and free,

one should be able to control themselves a priori. However, since ancient times the human soul has been viewed in a compartmentalized matter. Both Plato and Aristotle argue about different opposing parts of the soul trying to dominate one another. Gottfried Leibniz defines the human being as consisting of appetition (desires), volition (will) and reason. The person is not a sole carrier of the rational beginning within their own person. One is also a subject to irrational actions, wrong biased judgements, and inexplicable emotional states. Being able to overcome those manifestations of the self are what conquering oneself suggests.

Such a perspective implies that when one is referring to themselves, one is also differentiating two concepts of themselves. Elizabeth Anscombe examines this problem in her work *The First Person*. There she scrutinizes Rene Descartes prominent words “I think, therefore I am” (Cogito ergo sum). As Descartes can be sure with certainty in the truthfulness of the proposition “I exist”, the same cannot be claimed for the altered version “Descartes exists”. That can only be the case if “I am Descartes” is not a tautology since “I” and “Descartes” are not equivalent in meaning. In other words, what is meant by “I” is one’s inner understanding of one’s own self which doesn’t carry absolutely truthful value. Descartes might be unaware of his true nature which would make the claim “I am Descartes” reasonably false. In the case of conquering oneself, the self is doing the exact same action: she is trying to make both concepts equal so that “I am X” becomes a truthful statement. Since such process requires the self to oppose parts of her own self, the action require the inner strength of the individual.

In conclusion, in this essay I examined Laozi’s words from *Daodejing. A Philosophical Translation*. I tried to analyze the main differences between the concepts of selfhood and otherness and reason how these disparities would influence one’s attitude towards knowledge (a result of consciousness) and conquering (a result of one’s will to power). I then tried to argue that the self is not entirely constituted by the quality of selfhood which is inherent to her human nature.