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The Interval Between Humans: A Probe into the Possibilities of Being

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Abstract:

By taking as background a few examples from Japanese culture and society, as well as an ethnographic insight, this essay reconsiders the way anthropology usually deals with and talks about issues regarding cultural differences in human relations. These issues, which start from the fact that different cultures articulate human relations in different ways, have as one of their main theoretical outcomes the analysis around the categories of ‘self’ or ‘person’. However, within this move lies something akin to a ‘gestalt misconception’ that reduces a shared moral understanding (human relations) to an analysis of conceptual categories and their cognitive, psychological, subjective (or other) processes. Alternatively, the essay proposes a more dialogical approach informed by Gadamer’s idea of ‘dialogue’ and ‘fusion of horizons’, where one aims to learn *from* other cultures and not *about* them. As a result, some reflections of a philosophical, moral and practical character are presented, leaving theoretical formulations about the ‘Japanese self’ out of the equation. This essay’s general purpose is not an exploration of ‘Japaneseness’, but rather a probe into the possibilities of Being.

Keywords: Ethics and morality; Self and person; Japan; Fusion of horizons; Being-with

Introduction

Having an experience with that which is different or unknown opens up possibilities and perspectives to look differently at the world and at ourselves. When, for instance, we have some kind of contact with a different context or culture, there lies, in that awareness itself, a tacit invitation to gradually reassess our own assumptions and presuppositions. And in case such contact or experience proves to be genuinely meaningful, some of those presuppositions are somehow readjusted or extended, without necessarily being abandoned altogether. The world and its occurrences now disclose themselves under a different light; our awareness of things and world seems to have been enlarged and, somehow, the horizon that unfolds around us broadens itself, creating room for that which was not part of it before.

From a phenomenological perspective, a horizon is that which gives us the totality of intelligible world – or better yet, it is the very possibility that a world can show up as such. And as we move, it moves with us and reconstitutes itself, as a never-closing openness. This is, naturally, a metaphorical understanding of horizon: a blend of cultural perceptions, customs and social rules, historical context, language, experiences and personal learning. What we are and how the world shows up to us is always-already derived from that which our horizon makes available and discloses. Still, when undergoing an experience of contact with a different culture, for example, there lies always a possibility of what can be called a *fusion of horizons*.

With this insightful notion, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer showed us how our relationship with that which, to some extent, is ‘other’ can take the form of a true, genuine and edifying dialogue (1975b, 311–18). A ‘fusion of horizons’ is what happens – or what can eventually happen – when we have such a dialogue. Whether by engaging in a dialogue with an acquainted, with a text or in what is usually called ‘intercultural dialogue’, lies a possibility of fusing horizons. However, in a genuine dialogue, (one in which we are truly engaged and trying to come to terms with our interlocutor) we are not primarily concerned with understanding the other’s horizon by suspending our own¹ but,

¹ Here it is important to point to the contribution of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* with the idea of “fore-structure of understanding” ([1927] 1962, secs. 148–153): the idea that we always start from a certain set of assumptions, pre-conceptions, perspectives, etc., most of which are not even available to us, but constitute the very possibility of coming to understand anything whatsoever – understanding always has to start from somewhere. For an insightful elucidation on this issue in Heidegger’s thought and its consequences see (Lafont 2005).

rather, with letting those presuppositions be equated, shaken or extended – or not – through the dialogue itself, taking what is said as significant, relevant, true. As an outcome to the dialogue, neither interlocutor replaces entirely her own view on a given subject matter with the other's view on the same issue. And should that happen, it is never a sudden or radical change, but a gradual, slow movement towards the new perspective and away from the incomplete, inadequate, or wrong one. William James captured this idea in his famous saying: "in matter of belief, we are all conservatives". This means that, again in his words, "New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as to ever show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity" (1998, 35). At the end of a dialogue that fuses horizons, neither view remains the same as before, for both were extended, amplified in order to accommodate something of the other.

A true and enriching dialogue has the quality of an *event* that unfolds as a certain *subject matter* (Ger., *Sache*) forming itself and constantly being reformulated. Thus, what emerges as relevant from a fusion of horizons is not the *who*, but the *what*, i.e., the subject matter itself that, through a kind of consensus, has become somewhat clearer. In other words, a fusion of horizons does not seek to understand the other's horizon, but the *subject matter* that inhabits it. In the end, the knowledge that emerges from the dialogue neither consists of propositions about one's own view nor is it about the other and his 'world'. It is, rather, a *promise of knowledge* concerning a given issue that, although articulated with different outlines, persists as a common concern.

As a discipline with a long tradition of dialogue with other cultures, anthropology can make this fusion of cultural horizons possible. Not only does it carry with it an extensive number of ethnographies and texts that disclose different worldviews, but it also tends to be a discipline that, by its very nature, is open to cultural difference. Nevertheless, holding to the explanatory and descriptive principles that characterize their discipline, anthropologists have, on some occasions, missed an opportunity to learn *from* the cultures with which they related and thus give life to "an interpretation that has revelatory power" (Gadamer 2001, 42). This gap does not mean that anthropology has not produced texts that are profoundly interesting and relevant. It does mean, however, that the way in which in some cases it has done so, as well as the conceptual language used, closed them within themselves and/or the discipline itself. The descriptive and explanatory bent, in how they portray and elaborate a coherent and logical whole to validate the parts, has its virtues in the way it presents us with contexts we know nothing

about. But because it explains through description, contextualization and systematization, it also has the vice of making those worlds somewhat closed within themselves. To return to the above metaphor: the way in which some culturally different outlooks on the world have been approached has had the consequence of putting a frame around a certain cultural horizon, making its fusion with other horizons rather difficult.

In this essay, the case in question is related to the way in which cultural differences in human relations have tendentially been examined and discussed around the notions or categories of the 'person' or 'self'. An emblematic and representative example of the anthropological debate around the issues regarding the 'person' is Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift*.² In the introduction, the author seeks to establish some theoretical, epistemological and methodological frameworks. Her main task is to eliminate the theoretical abstractions that derive from anthropologists' analytical language and that increase the gap between what is said and the realities it aims to describe; along with a critique on the supposed "holism" and "internal coherence" of the monograph (1988, 5–6). Her argument and critique seem, at first, to be aligned with the critique presented here. However, the problems begin with the outlining of the strategy to be used, described as follows:

The task is not to imagine one can replace exogenous concepts by indigenous counterparts; rather the task is to convey the complexity of the indigenous concepts in reference to the particular context in which they are produced. Hence, I choose to show the contextualized nature of indigenous constructs by exposing the contextualized nature of analytical ones. This requires that the analytical constructs themselves be located in the society that produced them. (1988, 8)

The issue now becomes not to analyze indigenous thought by resorting to its own concepts, but to *contextualize* the use of those concepts, simultaneously *contextualizing* the analytical concepts used. It is a complex and daring methodological option; but, it seems, it accomplishes no more than walking in circles around itself. A likely consequence of this can be seen in action in two of the various paragraphs, also in the

² By quoting the following passages, the goal is neither to criticize the work in its entirety nor to reduce the work to its introduction. The purpose is only to illustrate, within the scope of the matter at hand ('self' and 'person') and through one of its most representative texts, what has been outlined so far.

introduction, where Strathern focuses on the issue (which is of interests to this essay) of the person in Melanesia:

The suppression of internal differentiation occurs, however, in a pluralized context of sorts. This is the plurality that takes the specific form of a differentiated pair or duo. 'Many' and 'one' may be homologous, but neither is to be equated with a pair. When either a singular person or a collective group comes into relation with another, that relation is sustained to the extent that each party is irreducibly differentiated from the other. Each is a unity with respect to or by analogy with the other. The tie or alliance between them cannot be subsumed under a further collectivity, for the dyad is a unity only by virtue of its internal division. (1988, 14)

Single, composite persons do not reproduce. Although it is only in a unitary state that one can, in fact, join with another to form a pair, it is dyadically conceived relationships that are the source and outcome of action. The products of relations including the persons they create inevitably have dual origins and are thus internally differentiated. This internal, dualistic differentiation must in turn be eliminated to produce the unitary individual. (1988, 14)

Incomprehensibly unnecessary methodological options yield unnecessarily incomprehensible reflections. The problem at stake is not related to an eventual lack of logic, meaning, or internal coherence of the argument based on the premises established by the author. Rather, it is concerned with the path she must travel in order to fulfill those premises and acquaint us with the 'person' in Melanesia. It is a path comprised of a series of opaque ideas that announce themselves as contradictions, but that, in the end, reveal themselves as harmonious. A vocabular cluster with the purpose of "contextualizing Melanesians' views" (1988, 13) and requiring a pre-definition of concepts so that we can, finally, have a *good understanding* of them.³ When presenting us the view on 'personhood' in Bali, Geertz (1973) seems to suffer from this "contextualizing" anxiety as well. Although with a completely different language, his exhaustive portraying of the name system and the understanding of time seems to make Bali culture into a whole, further closing it within itself and framing it within a "thick description".

³ In *Property Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things*, the theoretical explorations of relationality or the 'person' retain the same nature. (see Strathern 1999, 13–25; 233–61).

Underlying these methodological choices lies an attempt to suspend our own cultural horizon and transpose ourselves to the other's cultural horizon in order to understand not so much the truth of what is said, but how what is said becomes true in the light of that particular horizon. In making this movement, we claim to have understood the other when we finally manage to understand his cultural horizon. But this kind of understanding, Gadamer warns us,

[...] is not a true conversation – that is, we are not seeking agreement on some subject – because the specific contents of the conversation are only means to get to know the horizon of the other person. [...] when we have discovered the other person's standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him; [...]. (1975a, 314)

The fundamental problem with this perspective is, again, summed up by Gadamer in reference to what is 'historically other', but that we can apply *ipsis verbis* to what is 'culturally other':

We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint—i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves. Acknowledging the otherness of the other in this way, making him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth. (Gadamer 1975a, 314)

This serves only to illustrate the fact that, by holding to an explanatory and contextualizing attitude, we sometimes had some difficulty in remaining faithful to a genuine dialogue with that which is culturally different and have opted instead to build a conceptual and theoretical apparatus to refer to what could otherwise become an edifying dialogue. Moreover, instead of going back to what initially set them off, i.e. relationality and its shared moral expression, the debates surrounding the 'self' and the 'person' have tended to become somewhat hermetic, technical or objectifying discussions: taking the 'self' and the 'person' as objects par excellence of a scientific endeavor to uncover the principles of human behavior, the 'ethnopsychologies' (White and Kirkpatrick 1985; Lutz 1988); discussing on whether or not there are differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of self (Ewing 1990; LiPuma 1998; Lutz 1985; Murray 1993; Spiro 1993); articulating these debates with the notion of 'identity' and its redefinition (Sökefeld 1999) or developing new conceptualizations, like *dividual* (Strathern 1988), permeable

and partible person (Busby 1997), fragmented, fluid or saturated self (see Sökefeld 1999), or forensic and mimetic person (Lambek 2013).

Although with its own frameworks and conceptual language, kindred discourses on the ‘self’ are also present within Japanese Studies and Anthropology. Ruth Benedict’s classic work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) seemed to open the path by deploying a schematic idea of Japanese behavior based on a distinction between ‘circles of obligation’ and ‘circles of human feelings’. In this way, she could *explain* the co-existence of disciplined behavior with aesthetic feelings. By the 1970s’ Nakane Chie (1970) introduced the idea of the Japanese self as ‘sociocentric’ and analyzed the processes through which the self is constituted in the relationship with the group. Characterizing the Japanese through this theoretical framework, Nakane turned the Japanese into something like an alterity to Westerns: individuals with limited autonomy *versus* individuals with maximized freedom. Doi Takeo, a Japanese psychoanalyst, builds on Nakane’s model and characterizes the Japanese self as a receiver of external stimuli and, therefore, dependent and conditioned by the group. He sets out to analyze differences in behavior within relationships: between, on one hand, public or external contexts (*soto*, outside), where the Japanese behave in a quiet and constrained way; and, on the other hand, personal or inner contexts, where spontaneous self-expression is revealed (*uchi*, inside). This binary model of *soto/uchi* – or *omote* (front) and *ura* (back) – was henceforth used as a paradigm of the Japanese self and as a conceptual device to understand and explain its behavior (Bachnik and Quinn, Jr. 1994; Rosenberger 1989; 1992).

Other works, although much more nuanced and fluid, still feed on the same binary model. Kondo’s analysis (1990), for example, rests more on the *uchi*, or *hone*, dimension and how it is “produced” by external factors, such as power relations, work and gender. Lebra (2004) expands these models and articulates them with ‘opposition’ and ‘contingency’ models – more common in the West and in Japan, respectively. Her argument is based on the binary models described above and presented through numerous examples, such as language, ceremonies, early childhood education or work. In several other studies, we recurrently find qualifications like ‘sociocentric’, ‘group-oriented’ (De Vos 1985; Markus and Kitayama 1991) or other ways of defining and sketching the Japanese self: by “three levels” of tension between what the self can control and understand and what escapes both its control and understanding (Mathews 1996); or by taking the nature of the Japanese self through a model of opposition against an ‘Other’ (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990).

The disagreement raised here regarding these discourses, conceptualizations and schematic models is twofold. On one hand, implicit in these works lies something akin to a "gestalt misconception": the reduction of a moral and pragmatic expression identified by the anthropologist (namely, that different cultures articulate human relations in different ways) to a theoretical account on conceptual categories and their formative, cognitive, psychological, subjective, or other, processes (through the various reflections on the constitution of the 'person' or the 'self'). These paradigms and their conceptual languages seem to deal with human relationality in a rather objectifying way by taking the 'self' as an object to which a bunch of traits and a couple of descriptions get attached, or by uncovering the alleged patterns, principles or laws of its development. It is important to stress, however, that what is here called "misconception" is not necessarily an epistemological one, but philosophical. In other words, the skepticism is not related with whether or not a certain 'self' has such and such characteristics, e.g., if we can ascribe a binary or any other model to the Japanese self, but what kind of knowledge can we attain from such perspectives and rationale. Overall, the works referred to above are not necessarily wrong; but they stand as a contrasting perspective to what will be proposed: namely, an alternative way to think, approach and talk about issues of relationality without framing the discussion in the technical and conceptual language that derives from previous approaches. This takes us to the second point.

Staying within these conceptual and rhetorical frameworks, the debates around the 'self' and the 'person' end up, theoretically speaking, closing culturally different horizons, framing them and making them rather hermetic. As a consequence, the possibilities of a *fusion of horizons* are severely limited. After the exhaustive definition or sketching of the particularities of the 'self', Japanese or otherwise, these studies seem to lack a more philosophical and dialogical reflection that would allow us to seize for ourselves possible insights that their relationality may entail – the horizon gets framed and turned into a cultural whole only accessible by means of its internal logics.

This essay's general purpose is, on the contrary, to establish a dialogue with a few aspects, ideas, historical and contemporary notions taken from Japanese culture and philosophy, including a small ethnographic reflection. The suggestion is not concerned with rethinking the concepts in which questions about 'selves' are framed, but with asking a substantially different question: namely, as we move through the examples chosen, what lessons or moral understandings do they convey and what can we learn *from* the way human relationality is articulated in them? Placing this essay as an alternative approach

to the usual discourses around ‘selves’ and ‘persons’, as well their conceptual guidelines and language, a possible answer to this question will be offered.

At this point two disclaimers are needed. The first one concerns a possible and implicit endorsement of the ‘culture as bounded whole’ idea that this essay seems to be perpetuating. While it goes without saying that cultures are definitely not bounded and unchangeable entities with a set of fixed traits and principles that we can explain away through some theoretical propositions and analytical concepts, it does not necessarily follow that there is no such things as ‘culture’ and that there are no differences whatsoever to account for between, for instance, what we usually call Melanesian, Greek, Indian or Japanese cultures – differences that are a trigger for anthropological reflection. Behind cultural differences, whatever they are and however nuanced or blurred, there are specific historical developments (sometimes an encounter between two cultural horizons, fusing an aspect of one into an aspect of the other), a canon of literature and its exegesis, a set of works of art and its preservation, a tradition of philosophical and religious ideas and its reinterpretation, and a number of places or buildings that bind some of these together. In sum, it is certainly the case that culture is neither an entity nor a bounded whole one can theoretically exhaust. But it is also true that within the philosophies, the works of art and the oral or written literature that historically constitute a given cultural horizon, lie actual moral outlooks on the world, lessons or teachings that invite those who are open to their messages to learn something from them.

The second note is related to the first one. There will certainly be readers who will find this essay as just another endorsement of ‘Japaneseness’. After all, that is what this essay seems to be making when it chooses samples from Japanese culture in order to build an argument. The concern is reasonable: after all, historically speaking, Japanese studies began precisely from arguments revealing a supposed essence of Japanese people (the famous debates on *nihonjinron*, ‘treatises on Japaneseness’) and scholars today strive to keep those ideas at bay. However, they usually conflate two sets of two notions. One, mentioned by Thomas Kasulis (2009) when analyzing historically recurrent assumptions and motifs in the history of Japanese philosophy, is the confusion between a generalization and a universalization. One thing is to say that in all of Japanese thinkers (or culture) lie the same set of assumptions and motifs; another thing is to say that “most Japanese thinkers most of the time show evidence that they share these principles”. And in truth, Kasulis adds, “[a] counter-example does not refute a generalization; only a better generalization can do that” (2009, 218). Closely linked to this, is a second set of notions

that are usually conflated, albeit sometimes implicitly: namely ‘Japaneseness’ and ‘Japanese culture’. Hence, those who express something concerning ‘Japanese culture’ are usually accused of endorsing the existence of a Japanese essence or ‘Japaneseness’. However, this is a fallacy. The notion of ‘Japaneseness’ implies the existence of a concrete essence that establishes what it means for something to be Japanese. In this sense, endorsing ‘Japaneseness’ would be to imply something along the lines of ‘A, B, and C are characteristics of Japanese X; if those characteristics are absent, then X cannot be said to be Japanese’ – in other words, it concerns some kind of frontier between what is and what is not Japanese. Another completely different perspective is to discern historical themes and ideas, or philosophical, religious or ethical concerns extant in the history of Japanese culture and to dialogue with them. Although it would be a logical fallacy to leap into the conclusion that those themes or ideas *define* what is Japanese and separates it from what is not, the fact is that they are historically a part of Japanese culture, horizon, tradition, etc.; and can be grasped by those who contact with and study its history, philosophy or literature.

That being said, what follows is not another discourse on ‘Japaneseness’, but an open dialogue with a few ideas and notions found within the Japanese cultural horizon and a reflection on some possibilities of being human – this will be the ‘subject matter’ (*Sache*) in our attempt to *fuse horizons*.

The interval between humans

Should there be meaning in human lives, through which they become enriched and thickened, it does not arise *ex nihilo* from within each one of us. We do not merely assign meaning to things, rather we draw meaning from them. For the most part, in our pre-reflective and non-thetical comportment (Ger., *Verhalten*), we do not impose meanings upon the world, but receive them from it as well as from the countless ways in which we are involved with it. Still, we are individuals. In our relationship with the world or with others, we do not cease to be an "I"; neither do we fail to have autonomy of movements and desires, nor to understand what surrounds us from a point of view that is, inevitably, ours. What can eventually change is the way in which we tacitly play the game of the 'to and fro' between a mere submission to what surrounds us and an assertive imposition of our subjective view upon the world – the latter being recurrently present in the

contemporary world. How, then, can we begin to grasp the possibilities of truly being-in-the-world, at the expense of these two possibilities?

The ground we are about to set foot on is not new, quite the opposite. In ethical or moral reflections within modern Japanese studies and philosophy it is common to invoke the Japanese word for 'human being', *ningen* 人間. However, the issues revolving around this notion are not without its problems and polemics. The philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō is one of the main examples of such polemics and it stands as one of the forerunners of studies on 'Japaneseness' or *ninhonjinron*. His ethical thought, built around the notion of *ningen*, was largely criticized for its political connotations and approximations to nationalism and militarism (see Bellah 1965; Dale 1986; Harootunian 2000; Sakai 1997). While this type of concerns are certainly justified, there is, however, mostly in the field of philosophy, a more positive and less critical approach to Watsuji's thought by engaging with his ideas within a philosophical dialogue, and not necessarily by exposing the historical or political context where they were developed (see for example Johnson 2016; Krueger 2013; Maraldo 2002).

As to what concerns this essay, the purpose is not to critique, re-interpret or re-evaluate Watsuji's thought around the word *ningen*, but just to put it forth as a fertile hint and idea from which to start our reflections. The word *ningen* is composed of two characters: the first reads 'person', or *hito* 人; the second reads 'interval', *aida* or *ma* 間. Literally, the word means 'between persons', or, as we will take it here, 'interval between humans'. In *Rinrigaku* (1996), Watsuji draws from the word *ningen* the expression '*hito to hito no aidagara*' (人と人の間柄), 'the in-betweenness (*aidagara*) of persons', making the notion of *aidagara* one of the central tenets of his ethical thought. It is worth noting that, with this book, Watsuji reinforces his emphasis on what is shared, providing continuity to the criticism developed in his book *Fūdo* (Watsuji 1988) on the excessive focus on the individual in Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

Thus, with the word *ningen* and Watsuji's reading of it as 'the in-betweenness of persons', we are invited to think not necessarily about 'individuals', but about that which unfolds between them and the contexts where they are situated. We are human beings not only because we exist, inevitably, with other human beings (we are social beings), but because we *are* by attending to that which manifests and emerges from our relations to a Thou or to the world. To some degree, the word *ningen* articulates the awareness that to be human is to *be-as* that attentiveness. Thus, according to this reading, the way in which

human beings relate to each other is not necessarily grounded in the individuals involved. The relationship between Jessica and David, for example, is precisely what allows them to *be* what they are, so that their relationship is neither about Jessica nor about David, but about that which brings them together at a given moment. Kasulis (2018, 26–29; see also 2002) argues for something similar, when he identifies as one of the patterns recurring throughout the history of Japanese thought an emphasis on “internal relations”. In a philosophical thought grounded on internal relations, ethics (as well as knowledge, law, or aesthetics) does not exist in the form of ‘principles’ or ‘axioms’ but unfolds as dependent on and *as* relationships.

Gadamer captured the phenomenological dimension of this movement in his analysis of 'human play' in order to apply it to art and then to the idea of dialogue. When playing, we suspend our subjectivity. We truly become players in a game only when we allow ourselves to be carried away by what is being played, when we open ourselves to it and to its mode of being. In a way, we are dominated by the game. Not because we no longer possess agency, but because the game only exists in the meanings that become manifest through us as players. It is the structure of the game, which surfaces when its players are dedicated to it, that delivers those meanings. In that moment, the game exists not through the subjectivity or conscience of the player, but, on the contrary, the game draws the player into its domain and "fills him with its spirit" (1975b, 113). The phenomenological aspect that we want to draw into the relationality implicit in the word *ningen* is, in all respects, like that of the play. We are human beings in and through the ability to suspend our subjectivity and, within this *play* that is human relationships, by building something together – and not only by sowing our individual will in the world and reaping its harvest.

Outside theoretical thought or philosophy, we are still able to find instances of this disposition unfolding in more practical and worldly dimensions. By reading one of the most famous works of Japanese classical literature, *Makura no Sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*) by Sei Shōnagon, we cannot stay indifferent. This book stands as an important milestone in terms of the history of Japanese literature and as an historical document concerning the Heian period; and because it depicts life in the court of 10th century Japan, its relevance for approaching non-elite views of the world is low. However, taken as a whole, the book as it stands gives expression to a certain comportment towards the world. When reading the diary's entries, we sense a keen responsiveness and awareness in her detailing of several aspects of the world to which she belongs. We how, in that historical world,

human relations seemed to be centered on the search for meaning and value not so much within each individual, but amongst the natural world and the world of court events.

One of the main distinguishing features of Sei Shōnagon's diary is the dozens of lists that appear amidst all the other daily descriptions and notes. In them, she lists names of flowers, birds and mountains, ponds, flowering trees and trees without flowers, types of woods and the sounds of wind instruments, infuriating, embarrassing or inspiring things, and so on. Most of these lists manifest a kind of attentiveness to the surrounding world, either by discerning patterns, rhythms or combinations of shapes and colors in the natural world, or by poetically depicting the perfect scene for a specific day of a specific month. In a list called *Flowering Trees* there is an exquisite passage that almost looks like a filigree workmanship with words:

Around the time of the new moon at the end of the fourth month or early in the fifth, the sight of the orange tree's very white blossoms set amongst the deep green of the leaves, seen in early morning rain, is extraordinarily moving. With its brilliant glowing fruit, like balls of gold nestled among the flowers, it is quite impressive as a flowering cherry drenched with the dews of dawn. You need only to recall its close associations with the *hototogisu* and there is really no need to sing its praises further.

Such lists and their contents reveal Sei Shōnagon's attentiveness to the world and receptiveness to what surrounds her; she looks at the world and discerns the essence of things as they happen and in their happening. Moreover, and still in the diary, we are acquainted with poetry evenings (created on the spot) at courtrooms, as a central means of socialization. These evenings were one of the primary ways in which two or more persons socialized. And from Sei Shōnagon's descriptions, we can understand that these poetry-based relationships were built on the ability to create verses about the most meticulous details of the rain, birds and flowers, about events they took part in or amusing moments lived together.

Being human lies in this attentiveness and openness to look together at the interval between humans. An interval that is nothing more than the world and what constitutes it. In fact, it is an interval precisely because it does not necessarily refer to any specific individual, but rather to that which precedes us: the geographical, cultural, social, historical, and linguistic 'background' that, since we came into the world, has supplied us with the fundamental means to understand it and with an orientation to our Being. To prioritize maximum individual expression, imposing it repeatedly upon the world and the

other, is a symptom of ignoring the impossibility of stepping outside the world – outside the ‘background’ that has already constituted us – and building it as we please

The world as it is disclosed to us

Our path continues outside philosophy or social theory and takes us now into the world of the arts, namely, the world of Japanese poetry. We will be concerned, overall, with how the *haiku*, or *hokku*, articulates an instance of the moral outlook we have been exploring. The *haiku* is certainly the most well-known Japanese poetic form. It consists in a highly refined small poem with a set of 5, 7 and 5 syllables and its fundamental characteristic lies in the ability to convey a complexity of humors by combining an almost telegraphic expression with an extremely reduced, or nonexistent, subjectivity. Below are two of the most quoted and famous poems written by the poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694):

Old pond.

A frog jumps in.

Oh! the sound of water.

Oh! the silence.

Soaking into the stones,

The cicada’s voice.

What distinguishes a *haiku* is its non-descriptive and highly suggestive character. Just think about Sei Shōnagon’s detailed scene and imagine it condensed into 17 syllables without losing an inch of its profusion, emotion or existential import. This does not mean that a *haiku* and Sei Shōnagon’s description are fundamentally the same thing – for they are not. They are certainly different in very significant ways: in terms of form (sometimes in terms of content), in terms of their historical, moral or even religious background and even in their purpose as, let us say, literary devices. And yet, they are also similar in what they show us, namely, in how they convey an openness and attentiveness to that which unfolds within the world.

Called by means of a *haiku*, events like the ones described in the poems come forth as both the verbalized image and the ‘empty moments’ that infuse it. It is those ‘empty moments’ that, on one hand, remove the poet's subjectivity from the reading of the poem and, on the other hand, invite the reader to engage the poem not from what is outlined in the words, but from that which is disclosed by them. Through the poems’ suggestive character, we are given only a few coordinates so that an atmosphere and its meanings can come forth and manifest themselves. As Addiss puts it (2012, 3), "The

purpose of *haiku* is to use the mundane while exceeding the mundane [...] and ultimately to use words to go beyond words". Hence, the mode of being that underlies *haiku* poetry in general invites us to find a world prior to our urge to separate subject and object⁴. Through a *haiku*, a world is called upon; a world that is not of our own making; a world that is neither dependent on nor derived from any subjectivity, but invites us, if only for a few moments, to look beyond the constant meddling, judgments and propositions of the "I". In fact, in the very act of creating a *haiku*, the poet dismisses the involvement of his own subjectivity, for "he cannot interject anything of his personal or egoistic needs between himself and the experience" (Yasuda 1995, 132). In the western tradition we find similar remarks. For example, in *Poetics*, Aristotle states that the poet must erase any vestiges of himself in the poem (1469 a 7) – for that is a sign of a great poet; and in Heidegger's essay *Language* we are told that the greatness of a poem consists in that it "can deny the poet's person and name" ([1959] 1971, 193).

A *haiku* poem fully embodies this idea. For instance, a poem that seeks to summon loneliness, makes no explicit reference either to the author's loneliness or to that of anyone in particular, but to 'loneliness' as such – it is not an expression of loneliness by those who experience it, but a summoning and a calling forth to presence of loneliness itself. In addition, that which is called in the poem, whether it is an emotion, a happening or a place, comes forth as existent and present in the calling itself, i.e., within the domain of human understanding – "a presence sheltered in absence", as Heidegger would put it ([1959] 1971, 197). The omission of a subject and of subjectivity is, in turn, enhanced by the non-narrativistic nature of *haiku* (or most of Japanese traditional poetry). That is, it does not necessarily tell us a story or an episode, but rather institutes an atmosphere. Due to its impersonality and small size, it tends not to create a closed linguistic area, where in one way or another the message at stake is fulfilled at the end, but opens up a field, or a clearing (Ger., *Lichtung*), where what remains of each of us is suspended and that which is shared unveils and manifests itself. As a contrast to this, consider the following two stanzas:

⁴ Michael Marra makes a similar point to the one presented hereafter through the framework of the relationship between 'things' (*mono*) and 'words' (*koto*) in Japanese language, poetics and philosophy (Marra 2010, chap. 8).

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

These are the last two stanzas from William Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, where he describes how daffodils affect his mood. The poem brings to the fore the poet and his subjectivity. Instead of giving us the world in its presence, it expressively puts the emphasis on the poet's joy and gaze, in the 'inward eye' and on the subject that experiences the world, whether poet or reader. To be sure, be it the daffodils, the cherry blossoms, or the cicada's voice, any entity in the world can lead to the poet's act of writing a poem. However, in the case of *haiku*, the poem gives us a particular aspect of the world in its presence as it first discloses itself. In Wordsworth poem, on the contrary, the movement played by the stanzas seems not so much to invite us into the clearing that is our being-in-the-world, as to lead us back into ourselves and our thoughts. Both call on the emotional, moral or existential aspect of Being, but in *haiku* the world itself is called forth.

A *haiku*, then, both on the side of its creator and its reader, bears the promise of attending to that which is common, i.e. to what lurks between humans – at that moment, subjectivities are postponed. In *The Man Without Content*, Giorgio Agamben stresses this point as essential to all art:

So long as the artist lives in intimate unity with his material, the spectator sees in the work of art only his own faith and the highest truth of his being brought to art in the most necessary manner, and a problem of art as such cannot arise since art is precisely the shared space in which all men, artists and non-artists, come together in living unity. But once the creative subjectivity of the artist begins to place itself above his material and

his production [...] this shared concrete space of the work of art dissolves, and what the spectator sees in it is no longer something that he can immediately find again in his consciousness as his highest truth. (Agamben 1999, 24)

Agamben's "intimate unity" is not related to subjectivity. As with *haiku*, the artist attends to the common background and, from this movement, an awareness prior to the subject/object distinction discloses itself. But when, on the contrary, the artist's subjectivity is asserted and taken as the guiding principle in the poem's own movement, what emerges is no longer the common world, but purely individual interpretations. Here, the poem (or the work of art) ceases to have an intrinsic value by means of the scene it calls forth and becomes the product of the poet's creative freedom. Then, as a kind of echo, the observer, limited by the presence of the poet's subjectivity in the poem itself, is also compelled to put his own subjectivity to work.

In a certain sense, this concern was somehow present in Ki no Tsurayuki's (872-945) understanding of the origin of the poetic creation when he wrote in the *kana* preface to the classic anthology of poetry, the *Kokinshū* (c. 905):

As the affairs that human beings concern themselves with in this world are so manifold, they entrust the articulation of the thoughts in their hearts to what they see and hear.

Here we see that the creation of the poem is based on the entrusting of the expression of individual moods or thoughts to things in the world. Through the art of poetry making, the entities of the natural and empirical world, i.e. what we "see and hear", are summoned in order to give intelligibility to the deepest thoughts that inhabit the depths of human beings. Thus, following Ki no Tsurayuki's thought, at the essence of poetry lies a concern to anchor the individual, and therefore subjective, dimension of the poem in worldly things, in what is shared by the community of Beings.

A *haiku*, as an articulation of being-in-the-world, allows human beings to encounter and to engage with a common world and, simultaneously, unveils something about that world. But it does so by providing only fragments of phenomena, where the natural world reveals itself before the existence of a subject and an object – in events where subjectivity is temporarily suspended and where we allow ourselves to be carried away by what the world offers us. We find this idea of an *openness to the world* in a beautiful small story in Zen Buddhism:

Coming to a ford in a river, two Zen monks met a beautiful maiden who asked assistance in getting across because of the depth and strength of the current. The first monk hesitated, starting to make apologies – the rules of the religious order forbade physical contact with women. The second monk, on the other hand, without a moment's hesitation picked her up and carried her across. With a parting gesture of thanks, the young woman continued on her way, the two monks going off in the other direction. After some time, the first monk said to the second, "You shouldn't have picked her up like that – the rules forbid it." The second monk replied in surprise, "You must be very tired indeed! As soon as we had crossed the river I put her down. But you! You have been carrying her all this time!" (translated by Kasulis 1981, 46)

The underlying idea is that the first monk, unable to act unselfishly, found himself in a situation of self-reflection and reasoning, reconceptualizing his values and ideals in order to decide how to apply them in the situation. And since the rules forbidden him from having physical contact with women, he refused to help her. After the event, and still in a process of intense reflection, he continued to struggle with the second monk's failure to abide by the rules. The latter, on the other hand, dealt with the situation in an attitude of openness to the world: he was reactive to what was being presented to him at the time, without making any kind of judgment or without pondering choices – he brought nothing to the moment and left it with nothing.

At the foundation of this attitude lies one of the most central doctrines within the Buddhist tradition: the *no-I*, or *no-self* (Skt.: *anātman*, Jap.: *muga*). With roots in its Indian origin, the Buddhist doctrine of *no-self* states that there is no such thing as a fixed and unitary substance that constitutes the core of each human being. Rather, what exists is a set of five elements, the five *skandhas*, comprised of perceptions, volitions, feelings, consciousness and physical things. Moreover, because of their nature, the *skandhas* are always contingent and depend on the contexts where they are formed: they are inherently impermanent (Skt. *anitya*, Jap.: *mujō*). But if they are impermanent and if they are what constitutes human experience, then we also are ever changing beings. There is no such thing as a *self*-like substance that constitutes the core of each person, for what we fundamentally *are* is always a consequence of the momentary articulation of the five *skandhas*.⁵ From this perspective, there is more in being human than to rely on fixed,

⁵ For an exhaustive and detailed philosophical analysis of this Buddhist claim supported on original sources see (Siderits 2007, chaps. 3, 4 and 6).

ultimate substances, whether it is the *self* or the constant meddling of subjective judgments that spring from it.

The doctrine of no-self stands as one of the fundamental principles that feeds into the idea of *openness to the world* we are trying to explore. However, in the small story about the two monks there is little on this theoretical account on the constitution of persons. On the contrary, what springs from it is more like a moral and practical comportment towards the world and its happenings. What we will try to do, then, is not so much to focus on the constitution or processes of the *self qua no-self*, but – as we have doing so far – take some moral and pragmatical insights from it.

Dōgen (1200-1253), the founder of the Japanese *Sōtō Zen* school had similar concerns. His thought is a (sometimes radical) reinterpretation of central Buddhist notions, like a movement away from abstract and theoretical dogmas and towards their more pragmatic consequences. As Kopf notes (2001, 56), his intentions were “predominantly soteriological rather than conceptual”. More than an epistemological or theoretical account on ‘self as no-self’, his interest lied on its ethical and everyday implications: e.g., under the light of this doctrine, what does it mean, in practical terms, to exist in the world? In one of his most famous texts, the *Genjōkōan*, he states that it means the ‘casting off of body-mind’ (*shinjin datsuraku*), which, in turn, amounts to an *openness to things as they unveil themselves to us*: in his words, *genjōkōan*⁶. Within this concept lies a call to an awareness to the very presence of things and happenings, an attentiveness to what already exists and is present in the world prior to our formulation of propositions and subjective judgments about it. Analogous to Heidegger’s observation ([1927] 1962, sec. 33) that the “existential-hermeneutic ‘as’” (contexts of practical coping with the world) is more primordial than the “apophantical ‘as’” (contexts of analysis and assertions about things), the notion of *genjōkōan* also invites us to be aware of our own primordial embeddedness within the world and the temporal hierarchy that separates our actual engagement with it from the reflections we undertake afterwards. A beautiful analogy is found in another of Dōgen’s texts, the *Sansuikyō (Mountains and Waters Sutra)*:

Although the walking of the blue mountains is faster than “swift as the wind”, those inside the mountains do no sense this, do not know it. To “be in the mountains” is a “flower opening within the world”. Those outside the mountains do no sense this, do not

⁶ Translated, for example, as ‘the presencing of things as they are’ (Kasulis 2018, 222); or ‘the immediate presence of things as they are in their suchness’ (Waddell and Abe 2002, 39).

know it. Those without the eyes to see the mountains do not sense this, do not know, do not see, do not hear the reason for this. (translation in Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo 2011, 152).

People outside the mountains do not have the eyes to sense and know them, to grasp the “walking of mountains”, i.e., to understand the mountains. They stand outside them; they take the mountains in the quality of objects and relate to them as such. As for those inside the mountains, they do not sense or know it either precisely because they are inside them – instead, flowers just bloom. That is, things just happen, just manifest themselves. Dōgen’s idea seems to be related to the fact that to know the “walking of mountains” is not to take the mountain *as* mountain (i.e., as an object), but to be open and attentive to the happening and disclosing of things that the mountain itself is. He then adds that in order to “know their own walking” – in order to grasp their true nature – human beings “must also know the walking of mountains”. For when we recognize that to know the mountain is to be open to its happenings, we come to know ourselves *through* that openness and attentiveness. To “sense and know” is, after all, neither to *sense* or *know* as an action of a subject concerning an object, but to be open to the happening of things and to the invitations that the world addresses us as it discloses itself.

***Furusato*: an ethics of being-with**

If we are astute enough, there is an outline of a more humane understanding of our being-in-the-world being drawn right in front of us. Precisely because we did not cling to the characterization, categorization, and systematization of the ways in which Japanese individuals process their relations or how the self is structurally or schematically constituted, we were gradually able to begin to humanize, so to speak, (and not to ‘Japanize’, or ‘culturalize’) the issue at stake. What the word *ningen*, Sei Shōnagon’s outlook on the world, the mode of being of *haiku* or Dōgen’s lessons can unveil for us is not what Japanese are, but, above all, *what humans can be*. Pervading the examples above lies an invitation to think about the fact that we are inevitably open to the world and what constitutes it, i.e., what manifest itself in the interval between humans. The tendency, shared by all examples, to emphasize an attentiveness to the surrounding world or its details and to make it shine forth in our relationships is what motivates our reflection here. Through it, we are confronted with a silent, yet always present, articulation of the fact

that we are part of a historical, cultural, linguistic and social world⁷ – and with that comes, inevitably, responsibilities and duties, as we will now see.

Let us enter now into a more traditional anthropological setting and continue the thoughts above through an ethnographic reflection. In 2016 in the context of a research surrounding the relation between humans and landscape, I did some fieldwork on a small rural village in Niigata prefecture. Within the time staying in the village, I became aware of a relational ethics that led me to transcend the topic of landscape *per se* and reevaluate the topological dimension of what it means to live among others. One of the key concepts responsible for that shift was the Japanese concept of *furusato* ふるさと ('hometown' or 'native place').

It may not be too controversial to state that the idea of *furusato* can be seen as one of the various forms that the relationship with nature in Japanese society has acquired since the 20th century; a relationship that, regardless of its character, is a frequently highlighted and analyzed topic in academic circles (Asquith and Kalland 1997; Callicott and McRae 2017; Nomoto 2006). However, more than a mere eulogy of the relationship with nature, *furusato* is perhaps one of the concepts of everyday language and Japanese cultural imaginary that best conveys the affective, cultural and existential baggage that landscapes and non-urban places have in contemporary Japan. From a philosophical or poetic perspective, *furusato* can be rendered as 'home' or 'origins'. In fact, during the summer or the New Year's Day vacations, thousands of Japanese return to their *furusato*, in a movement of a larger scale than is observed in European countries – a journey popularly called *satogaeri* 里帰り, 'return to the village' (Berque 1997, 178–79). Etymologically speaking, it is composed by two words: *furu(i)*, 'old', and *sato*, 'village', originating, in its literal reading, 'old village'. This temporal dimension that the word itself congregates inevitably ends up evoking a connection with the past or, more precisely, with that which comes from the past. Additionally, the import of the idea of *furusato* can also be seen in the 1914 popular song *Furusato*, in the 1983 movie with the same name, directed by Seijirō Koyama, in *enka* ballads (Yano 2010, 168–78) or even in community

⁷ Affirming the belonging of human beings to historical and/or cultural horizons, does not necessarily mean that cultures are entities bounded by time and/or space. If it is true that humans inevitably move within a particular historical and cultural horizon, it is also true that nothing prevents them from fusing their cultural or historical horizon with another. It suffices to recall the history of all human contact, as an instance of a fusion of cultural horizons; or the endeavor that the discipline of philosophy is in itself, as an instance of a fusion of historical horizons.

revitalization initiatives called *furusatozukuri* ふるさとづくり (‘native place-making’) (Robertson 1994, chap. 1) – in all these dimensions of Japanese culture and society, the *furusato* and its existential, affective and moral potentiality is undoubtedly present.

However, the idea of *furusato* is also seen with a great deal of skepticism and suspicion by most scholars in Japanese Studies and Anthropology. It is usually approached as an ideal and a product of a fabricated nostalgia or nationalism (Ben-Ari 1992; Creighton 1997; Robertson 1998; Vlastos 1998, pt. 2), by relying, more or less directly, on the notion of the ‘invention of traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). From this perspective, the *furusato* stands as an ‘invention’ and a ideal instrumentalized by the government, travel agencies and media to instill on the Japanese a sense of loss of the rural, i.e., of the essence of Japanese culture, perpetuating thus a kind of nationalistic ideology. However, as is usually the case, one of the effects of ethnography is to upset the presuppositions we hold about some issue. And in fact, the interaction with an actual village that evokes the idea of *furusato* in several respects can indeed give us a different perspective on the issue.⁸

During the time spent within the above-mentioned village, and after grasping its communitarian dynamics, I was somehow invited to look beyond the critical reading on the *furusato* and take from it, instead, a pragmatic and moral perspective on the relationship between human beings and the places they inhabit. Disclosed by regular contact with the village’s inhabitants and endorsed by how they managed and cared for the village, was a different, ethical understanding of *furusato* and, thus, of the life in the community; something, in turn, was made clear to me by the village chief’s reply when I inquired on the meaning of the word *furusato*: “When I think about *furusato* I imagine something like a “temporal continuum”, a connection. In it, we occupy a place somewhere in the middle; the *furusato* is this whole ‘continuum’, the connection that exists between the ancestors and the future generations”. Thus, in some respects, living in that place assigns both to him and to the rest of the community the responsibility in preserving that link between those two poles, the ancestors and the next generations. Essentially, what exists in common between all generations and what emerges as that commonness is the community, the place itself. In the idea of *furusato* lies thus a tacit expression of consideration for the knowledge left by the various generations who have lived in a

⁸ Elsewhere (Santos Alexandre 2019) I have approached the *furusato* issue within the social sciences and formulated a critique as well as a different approach and interpretation to it.

certain place. Generations who, on a daily basis, imparted form and substance to that place, devising the necessary conditions so one could live there. The idea of *furusato*, as expressed through the village chief's words, embodies the respect for that effort and dedication, making a certain place a common good.

While something uttered by a single individual does not allow us to infer the meaning of *furusato* in Japanese culture and society, it still resonates with the village dynamics and with how its inhabitants attend and care for place itself. Thus, the reflection proposed here does not aim to present a standard reading of the notion of *furusato* but should be taken instead as a philosophical and anthropological interpretation of both the chief's words and the very life within the village. In this regard, the kind of knowledge that can be derived from such interpretation consists, as Ingold (2014, 387) puts it, "not in propositions about the world but in the skills of perception and capacities of judgment that develop in the course of direct, practical, and sensuous engagements with our surroundings". In other words, more than a set of statements that aim to correspond directly and objectively to an exterior reality, anthropological knowledge consists in the capacity to attend to peoples modes of being in the world and derive from them insightful hints and interpretations in order to think about what it means to be human.

It is from this perspective that we can start to look at the notion of *furusato* with a genuine humanistic and anthropological interest; and as we do so, we find in it a truly meaningful aspect: the tacit presence of an ethics of relationality, of *being-with*. Akin to the way in which the summoning of anthropology by anthropologists, or physics by physicists, would place them within a specific historical tradition of knowledge production and in dialogue with others who are also under the implications of the same discipline, so *furusato* seems to convey the historical and topological belonging of human beings in a rather comprehensive way. Through the idea of *furusato*, historical belonging is articulated as a sense of responsibility and duty towards what past generations have left us. It is up to us, individuals or communities in the present, to ensure that future others can come to know and experience what has been left to us. There is, naturally, an awareness that the world is changing, but the possibility of linking past and future is accomplished, not through opposition, but because 'here' there is still something that makes sense, that deserves to be learned, reinterpreted and passed on. In the same way that a tradition survives the test of time due to its adaptive capacity and its ability to articulate a particular meaning that is always intelligible and relevant for successive generations, through the idea of *furusato* something is also taken as relevant and is sought

to be preserved for future generations. The *furusato* provides us with a consciousness of historical belonging that is a precondition for the existence of any human being.

The consummation, in the present and in daily life, of our historical belonging is our belonging to a community. We do not only exist through a dialogue or relationship between the past and the future, but we also exist through relationships with others and with the world as presented in its immediacy. This has profound implications for what means being-with. First, we are-with the world. The *furusato*, also due to the connection to the rural world and its nature as an object of nostalgia and affection, allows us to think about our relationship with the world as a relationship of care. Care is invested in the details; there is an attempt to maintain human order without challenging the natural order. *Being-with* the world is, first and foremost, following the pace of the seasons – finding in each winter the prospect of a new spring. But it implies a clear inclination towards the other as well. The possibility of attending to the world around us is only fulfilled along with others who also live in it. Responsibility towards future generations implies, in the present, an attentiveness towards the communities or places where we live and towards the world. The *furusato* reminds us that to be human is also to take care of our worlds, of that which exists in the interval between humans.

In this historical and shared understanding of Being-with that *furusato* discloses, human beings do not fulfil themselves only by stating their uniqueness, by underlining how they differ from others and by shouting out those differences into the world; but because they are offered a broader horizon of the world to which they belong. And, within that horizon, to exist exclusively on behalf of one's (valuable and undeniable) individuality amounts to a poorer version of being human than to exist with others and with the world. In the end, this is not simply an issue of acknowledging and somehow solidifying roots in a particular community, but to open ourselves to the historicity, contexts and happenings that comprise the world where we live, or, to use Dōgen's notion, to open ourselves to things as they disclose themselves to us.

Epilogue

Above an attempt was made to explore different options of addressing ethical moral and relational issues. The purpose was to present a potential alternative to the rather abstract, technical and objectifying readings that normally come with debates surrounding the 'self' or the 'person'. Moreover, by keeping the inquiry within the Japanese cultural and

philosophical contexts, we tried to illustrate how it is possible to continue to explore the same issues within the same cultural horizon, while changing the questions we ask, the way we ask them and, above all, the way we sketch the “answers”. However, one could ask, how come court life in the 10th century, a poetic tradition, a Zen Buddhist idea or the life in one village can tell us anything about how the Japanese are? Well, they do not. But – to reiterate what has been said before – they were never intended to do that. These examples are certainly a (small) part of Japanese cultural horizon, but they obviously do not constitute the ‘whole’ of it. And we could never, even if we tried, capture that ‘whole’. This is the main reason behind the analogy with the ‘horizon’: we can never embrace it in its totality because it moves with us and is ever changing. Having said that, the hope and prospect with this inquiry is that the ideas presented within it can emerge as what they are and nothing more: a probe into the *possibilities* of Being; a reflection or a movement of thinking that explores, within a certain cultural horizon, new paths and hints to think about the human condition and what it means to *be*. This should be the goal of anthropology: to learn *from* other cultures and not only *about* them, i.e., to fuse horizons by engaging in a dialogue on a common subject matter.

On a final note, let us take a look at a particular and classic work on the ‘self’ and ‘person’, not with a critical spirit, but from a slightly different angle: Marcel Mauss' essay *A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; The Notion of Self*. At the outcome of Mauss' text, and in spite of its questionable theoretical and methodological options⁹ or the factual or historical errors that it might contain (see, for example, Laidlaw 2014, 35–39), there is a humanistic perspective that implicitly remains. At the end of the essay, Mauss concludes with a sober reflection that reminds us that the purpose of looking at other cultures (and the past) can involve more than just describing or explaining their particularities and differences. As an epilogue to the present essay, we make Mauss' words our own:

Let us say that social anthropology, sociology, history – all teach us to perceive how human thought ‘moves on’. Slowly does it succeed in expressing itself, through time, through societies, their contacts and metamorphoses, along pathways that seem most

⁹ Mauss deploys an evolutionist argument by trying to show how the concept of ‘person’ has been changing throughout human history, looking at its evolution from the *personnage* in “primitive” societies to the *self* in the contemporary world.

perilous. Let us labor to demonstrate how we must become aware of ourselves, in order to perfect our thought and to express it better (in Carrithers et al. 1985, 22–23).

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