

## Chapter 17

### Philosophical Compassion and Active Hesitation

#### – A Non-Critical Approach to Understanding

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#### Posing the Question of Truth

Long before we entered the time of post-truth, in which having an opinion is valued above all else, we had already lost the foundation of what it means to be. Truth either no longer existed or was already reduced to simply be a justified belief. Nietzsche's death of God heralded a time in which we understood that a church is empty of meaning except for the one we ourselves put in it. Life is the meaning we create. And although most people are successful imposters, the core of human life has become utterly devoid of meaning. But instead of trying to find one more existentialism, one more method of justifying our existence through a dependency on something that lies outside of ourselves, I will argue that we need to return to truth itself.

The question of truth is fundamentally an ontological question, aiming for a grounding of what is, rather than delineating what we can know. But it is simultaneously an ethical question, as ontology should always be understood ethically<sup>2</sup> – it is me, human, asking for the being of things, and therefore the question of truth is always being asked from within the relationship of the human with the thing. In other words, we will have to take

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" (1951) in *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other* (London: Athlone Press, 1998).

up the Heideggerian endeavor of returning to the question of being, without reducing everything to a fundamental thingness.<sup>3</sup> But as always we are already trapped in the Shakespearian illusion of being versus not-being: as if there is such a space from which we can think being that is not already being, we ask the question of truth as if we are an outsider even though we can never be unless we are already within some truth. And so life continues and the dualistic illusion persists in insisting on a dualistic question to which only one answer exists. As we breathe, and even beyond, there is a rudimentary 'always already' – that philosophical nightmare that ends all conversations. (For how can we create, how can we have a convers(at)ion, how can we think one moment different from another, when there is no before and no after?).

Framing this question of truth already brings up enough problems. For who is this 'we' that needs to take up this question? How can I talk about something more than myself, how am I appropriating the other that I don't know, the other that is not-me, in this search for a truth? How is the one I address not rigorously refusing to be included in my thinking?<sup>4</sup> Am I not already making a claim by saying this is a concern of me as a human being – who am I including and who am I excluding in and through this question? Why should I understand this to be an ethical problem, why not leave it as a metaphysical question that can be solved outside of language and human perception? Why not be a speculative realist, and deal with each relationship between things equally, not relying on the assumption of human superiority? Yet performing the Husserlian epoché on myself as a self, bracketing the mouth that speaks, the body that lives, is not possible after Heidegger. We are thrown into life not just as an exercise in boredom, but as the foundation of being. Taking

<sup>3</sup> Although it would go too far to go into this here, it must be made clear that reducing the human to one more thing as is proposed by object oriented ontologists, is not possible when understanding Heidegger in this way, in which being is always already from within a human relationship.

<sup>4</sup> Avital Ronell, personal conversation, August 12, 2018.

up this question of being thus muddies the water we call rationality. Pretending reality can be addressed outside of language, as something other than a well-crafted inherited construction of reality, outside of being-alive, is dangerous. For this pretense of a complete objectivity leaves out the lived history that is concurrent with every being.

Yet despite all these problems of even asking the question, there is an urgency to this question of truth. For without taking it up, my own understanding trumps anything else. If there is no road map that establishes the relationship between myself and the other, there are only different versions of me. My past, present and future merge into one. What remains is a continuous rehashing of things and the throwing up of whatever does not fit, relying only on what I already know, which equals that which was always already. It would make everything correct, every opinion just as valid and valuable as the next. This is multiculturalism that has triumphed in its death. This is the danger that contemporary democracy forces upon us, equating equality and justice, thereby foregoing all claims on the singularity of truth. Presenting truth as something that excludes others, that considers vulnerability and not-knowing as a denial of one's self instead of it being its fundamental possibility. This kind of truth-claiming foregoes the possibility of being loyal to a singular truth instead of accepting the constant fragmentation that leaves one groundless. What remains is a reality which consists of (paraphrasing Derrida) being completely inside the text, a reality (with Foucault) that functions only as long as we believe in it. But philosophers are more than chroniclers of the present. What is needed is a philosophy that allows for a future that is as of yet unknown and impossible. A future that is not a mere extraction of past and present, that goes further than a simple linearity of thought. A future that is not a "not-yet" that is reduced to an "always-already".<sup>5</sup> A future that allows for a truth that is defined in- and for-itself, not as a negation or an absence of the past and

<sup>5</sup> See: Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* (Austin: University of Texas Press), p. 53.

present that had come before it.<sup>6</sup> A truth that does not impose a violent inclusion upon that which it has itself excluded.

### Understanding Understanding

Truth is the moment of openness, the *aletheia*, the not-being-shrouded by knowledge and justified beliefs. That space in the middle of the forest where there is a clearing, an openness that is contained within each tree without exhausting the possibility that is necessarily left as an empty space. Picture Heidegger walking along the path in his beloved *Wald*,<sup>7</sup> but then as if he didn't already know where he was going, where he was and who he was. Because that is the openness that is required, the foundation of any being-toward-truth that is more than a collision with what you already are.

So, what then does it mean to understand anything, when any claim on knowledge would destroy the possibility of truth and is therefore to be avoided? Whenever we say or think or feel, whenever something is, it puts forward a claim of being, ending endless amounts of possibilities. Thus, we are drawing back, performing the ancient epoché on ourselves; a suspension of knowledge that allows for a not-knowing. Yet by searching for a possibility of not-knowing, are we not simply conjuring up an illusion of singularity, of otherness that simply reinstates the status quo? Is the opening in the forest really creating a newness out of the old, or is it an experience that deludes us to think we are clear of the trees? Is the sky not already thought while we walk through the forest? Is the blueness of the sky something we get from the world or project upon the world?<sup>8</sup> And if at least some of our knowledge is, in the Kantian sense, *a priori*,<sup>9</sup> are we

<sup>6</sup> See Fanny Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray* (Albany: State University of New York, 2019), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Gesamtausgabe 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Some studies suggest that sky has only been blue since modern times, noting that in ancient Greek texts, no single mention of the blueness of the sky is made. Cf. Guy Deutscher and William Gladstone.

<sup>9</sup> See: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).

then doomed to understand the world as we do, foregoing any possibility of the openness required for truth?

In any crisis we can hear people voicing the longing for change. Whether it is the climate crisis, the Arab spring, or the Covid-19 pandemic; the words people use are the same – but what is it that is asked for in the cries of ‘we don’t want to go back to the old normal’, ‘we want things to change’. We see the rupture of the prevailing norms as a possibility for radical change, a possibility to finally work on fighting climate change, on changing the economic system, on re-evaluating the notion of care. And it is not as if everything stays completely the same. The United Nations was formed, universal basic income schemes are being introduced. But, fundamentally, our outlook on life, on order, on how things work, does not change. As Cornel West explains:

The system cannot reform itself. We've tried black faces in high places. Too often our black politicians, professional class, middle class become too accommodated to the capitalist economy, too accommodated to a militarized nation-state, too accommodated to the market-driven culture of celebrities, status, power, fame, all that superficial stuff that means so much to so many fellow citizens. And what happens is (...) they really don't know what to do because all they want to do is show more black faces – show more black faces. But often times those black faces are losing legitimacy too...<sup>10</sup>

And while we protest that which puts us down, that which we dismiss as backward, that which systematically undermines our dreams, and while we look forward, the more we look at the world around us, the more our eyes are getting accustomed to the patterns, to the possibilities of which our present system allows us to think. This is what Foucault meant when he introduced the panopticon – it is not us who actively decide on what truth is, what reality is, this is decided for us by the space that is

<sup>10</sup> CNN live news, hosted by Anderson Cooper, 29 May 2020.

never empty. And if a shift were to happen, we can only observe this from the position of the victors, understanding truth from the power of the present corrupts, and when we want to understand the unknown future, we bring in the past as there is nothing else we can use to make sense of the world around us. So even when we are in the position to think the future anew, we fundamentally sabotage ourselves.

In other words, by living in the world we have internalized its (male) gaze.<sup>11</sup> We ourselves have become the object we must fight. When we understand truth as that radical opening, we must lose our minds. We follow in the footsteps of Nietzsche, whose life project to re-evaluate values after he had eliminated the horizon by which we understand the world around us, made him lose touch with reality. It is no surprise that philosophers and scientists are so much more capable of criticizing the present than presenting a critical alternative of the future. For truth and the future are negated by the present. And it is this dualism, this either/or thinking, that presupposes everything as being-in-being and does not allow for anything that is not already to be thought, that kills all possibility. A system that sets up an order of things can soften the borders but can never take the divisions between things away. Once men and women, mind and body, human and animal, were divided, their division became the backbone of the system itself. It is this dualism, this 'othering' of what is actually connected, that creates the panopticon, the prison of the present.

### Non-Critical Approach

The critical approach to understanding posits the subject in opposition to the object, where the subject is a unified whole looking out at something that is essentially foreign to the subject. This means that in a critical approach to understanding there is a directionality to understanding, and an essential distance between subject and the object.

<sup>11</sup> See: Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2006).

The relation between the subject and the object in such a critical scenario can be delineated by its two extremes. Critical understanding at its worst is a projection of the subject who posits his own world on that which he seeks to understand, resulting in a knowledge limited to what can be seen and what is already known. The limits of one's own world, the limits of the subject, are the limits of the understanding of the other. Categories of thought, language and previous experience are the kind of projections that the subject takes with him. It is in this sense that philosophers like Derrida and Foucault speak of the impossibility of change<sup>12</sup> and the panopticon<sup>13</sup> – of us being stuck in the present that recreates itself in a continuous loop.

At the other end of the spectrum, critical can be seen as being more in line with Levinas, who realizes that the subject is dependent on the other being looked at. In this case there is a projection of the object upon the subject. Here the subject is dependent upon the object. In this case the subject conforms to the object, and we could say that the subject is being destroyed in favor of the truth of the object. While this movement is in fact a reversal of the destruction happening in the other approach of critical understanding, the result is the same, namely the continuation of the either/or dichotomy between object and subject.

Even the more neutral Hegelian option of sublimation of both subject and object, where each is overcome by a third term, is still tied to this essential dichotomy. It simply substitutes a third reality and continues to allow the object and the subject to exist through their difference. True, the critical relationship of the subject outside of the object is overcome, but it is still a critical approach towards understanding where both self and other are destroyed and the difference between the two remains essential.

In this chapter I propose to look at understanding in a non-critical manner. This entails that subject and object are never in

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 441–461.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge 2002).

opposition, which is not to say that this approach demands that subject and object are the same, which would be another form of violence to the uniqueness of either one. This also means that neither object nor subject ‘wins’ in favor of the other. Instead, the non-critical approach to understanding argues for a method in which the idea of winning and destroying is relinquished. This also means that there can be no directionality, there is no looking from the subject to the other, because in this (male) gaze already lies the primal element of destruction. The search for a non-critical approach to understanding therefore aims for an understanding without destruction, an approach which allows for truth without violence.

### Presenting the Other

To understand what lies outside of the realm of what can be understood, to understand in a way that does not rely on pre-supposed knowledge and categories of thought, to understand in a non-critical way, we need to leave behind the dualism inherent in the subject that thinks. We need to find a method of thinking that does not allow difference to divide us, but that lets us work with difference, in line with the project of Luce Irigaray.<sup>14</sup> Irigaray worked to banish the dichotomy that “stands at the heart of a logic incapable of thinking difference (sexual, racial/colonial, and other forms of difference) beyond hierarchical dichotomies.”<sup>15</sup> We need a change that does not undo being, that does not force sameness or equality on things that are not the same, and which does not presuppose that the one can be substituted by the other if only we try hard enough. Together with Irigaray this chapter endeavors “to criticize the metaphysical tradition of presence not by escaping presence altogether, but by establishing that said tradition never has been able to think presence other than as absence, and that a proper critique of such tradition therefore depends on our rethinking

<sup>14</sup> See for instance: Penelope Deutscher, *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time*, p. 121.



the relation between presence and absence in non-oppositional terms.”<sup>16</sup> To think truth without succumbing to the thinking that is in charge, we need a radical movement that does not present an alternative, that does not consider things in terms of linear progress, nor as something that presents the feminine as taking over or on the side of male logic. What we are looking for is something that does not simply repeat the Hegelian dialectic.

But even language is making this understanding of truth as not-the-other-as-the-same impossible. We talk about rupture, about change, about otherness, but all these terms plot to divide us, to have the one facing the other. Whether it is time or space that stands between the two, we always approach reality from an outer-space, from the future or the past, looking at the one present of which we know only one thing: that it is not us.<sup>17</sup>

Although the initiative of Levinas to ground the subject in the relationship to the Other is worthwhile, laying the foundation of an ethics as preceding ontology,<sup>18</sup> as Bracha Ettinger explains, he continues the logic inherent in the male gaze – thereby perpetuating the linear logic of progress that I will call a critical male approach to difference. By presenting ourselves as starting from the other, we take the removal of ourselves from that which we are not as a starting point for ourselves. Defining something through a lack, the not-being-male, the non-white, non-Western, non-rational. The other is then reduced and limited to being not-me. The o-ther is over-there, and the distance between the I and the other as the beginning of knowledge reinforces the inability to understand truth except through this lack that forms the basis of the critical male approach. The more we think we move closer to what is, the Levinasian self, the more fundamental the difference between the I and the other – which results in a violence either way. By trying to understand the Other/Self we immediately become violent: we either reinstate the duality

<sup>16</sup> Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time*, p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. The problem that Immanuel Kant outlined in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* but only solved by enforcing the distinction of a prior and a posteriori knowledge – imposing another division to make up for the inaccessibility of truth as an experience.

<sup>18</sup> Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”.

by Othering the Other, or we reduce the otherness to a sameness and thereby destroy the singularity that is presented in each and every Other. Even by asking the other to tell the subject what is required, what is the right way to behave to allow the otherness to exist, we violate the other – since there remains a ‘we’ that needs to ask and an ‘other’ that is burdened with defending itself due to its otherness. As long as there is a ‘we’, there must be an other. And as long as there is an other, there is a gaze, there is a minority, there is a power structure that prevents understanding.

Instead of the critical approach that violates, let us look for a kind of understanding that is to be open toward all possibilities. If understanding invokes a structure of any kind, truth remains enslaved to the powers that be. Whether it is called the male gaze, or biopower, whether it presents itself as racism, sexism, ableism – the result of a structure of understanding that does not allow for the Other is a totalitarian worldview that encompasses all possibilities and thereby excludes truth.

Are we then to conclude that a non-critical manner of understanding is impossible? When we think of understanding in terms of object–subject relations, when we consider the other always outside of the self, there is no other way than to label the question of an understanding as one that is based on difference – and the question of truth continues to be an impossible question.

### The I and the non-I

Instead of presenting the Other as other, invoking the duality that kills any possibility of truth not already drowned in the present, let me accept myself as not part of such a duality. I am not on one side of any equation. I am just as much self as non-self. The border that links me to any perceived other is the border that is within me, that presents myself to myself. When there is a distinction made, this is a distinction that is contained within, not as a limit of the outside-of-me. If there is an-other, then I relate to myself as this other. Which is destructive when I

consider everything to be (a) given, when limiting the I to a notion of the self that presupposes a set world and a set understanding of what it means to be human. But the opposite is just as problematic: to consider the self an endless realm of possibilities that has no borders. For without borders there is no self, but with borders there is always an other that lies outside of the self which is excluded. So the way forward is neither a contained understanding of truth/self, nor an empty realm of nothingness/possibility.

The problem lies not in the self, but in the frame that is used, the understanding of duality in the sense of a dichotomy that is an either/or, a with me or against me. By lining up difference as the starting point for the self, as the source of understanding, as the fixation within a struggle for survival in which the weaker one will perish. But duality does not necessarily entail power in the sense of power-over. There is also the possibility of a power-with, a power-to. Presenting a self, an I, is already a power-move, but this power does not need to be understood as a power-over, a power that is based on a degradation of an other.<sup>19</sup> There is a difference between *macht* and *kracht*, the first one being a power-over that creates a hierarchy of the one over the other and fixes positions. The latter, power as *kracht*, is the potential to act, that remains inside even though it needs things outside of it.

This is how we can understand the distinction that Bracha Ettinger raises when she talks about the I and the non-I.<sup>20</sup> It is not a distinction through which a power-over-structure emerges. It provides a framework to help us use the words we have to relocate the essence of what we are after. When searching for understanding there remains the limit of the I that understands, but within the framework of Ettinger this limit is not a line that excludes. This border can be understood as a space, one in which we can dwell, as a borderspace that allows for a blurring of limits without denying or framing the I and/or the non-I.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*.

The borderspace is matrixial, the place in the womb where the difference between the child and the mother is not clear, where both merge without losing their respective places. They combine and work together, fragilizing themselves as they both allow the other to come so close that it may threaten their own life, yet this matrixial borderspace also gives them life. Without the child, there would be no mother, and without the mother, there would be no child. But we could take this metaphor even further and say that there is not just dependency between the I and the non-I, there is also an instantaneousness that Ettinger indicates with (m)Other. The existence of the mother and the child takes place in an in-between, a non-place that cannot be indicated in a way that understanding in the phallic meaning of the word would require. There is no distance between the I and the non-I, no gaze is possible, no violence against the one without destroying the other.

As a result, there is no language for this in-between space. One is not-yet, not-yet-child and not-yet-mother. This can be seen from the fact that it remains impossible to talk about miscarriage, that there are no words for what is lost that adequately describe what Alison Reiheld speaks of as a 'liminal event'.<sup>21</sup> An event that takes place on a threshold, in a space in which one social status no longer applies but neither does the new one (yet). It is an event that remains outside of understanding, as defining it as anything except for this liminality would destroy the essence of this experience. But this still doesn't explain what understanding in this liminal space means, as without the possibility of an understanding that allows for a not-knowing, a hesitation of being, the liminal space would be "a place of ambiguity and anxiety",<sup>22</sup> as Ronald Carson defines the liminal space. But we need to be careful, as this anxiety only exists because of the need for an understanding that is fixed, that

<sup>21</sup> Alison Reiheld, "The Event That Was Nothing: Miscarriage as a Liminal Event", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Spring 2015, 9–26.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Carson, "The Hyphenated Space: Liminality in the Doctor-Patient Relationship." In Rita Charon & Martha Montello (Eds.), *Stories Matter: The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 180.

is either/or instead of a place where the I and the non-I can enter a state of borderlinking. This anxiety is not part of the in-betweenness of the liminal event, it is simply due to not being able to let go of the need for the security and definiteness that is associated with a critical approach to understanding.

### Compassion as an Active Hesitation

Within the borderspace there is a manner of understanding the possible that does not rely on propositional knowledge. An understanding that is not based on a critical approach. But how to define a type of understanding that defies all defining? How to defend what is defenseless? How to evaluate what is beyond value, what is more fundamental to all values?<sup>23</sup>

What is needed is a kind of understanding which I would like to call a kind of philosophical compassion, or active hesitation. Hesitation is normally understood as a pulling back, a passive attitude. A withholding of something, not engaging with something head-on, but waiting, observing, reflecting. What is meant here is a reluctance to judge, not a reluctance to engage.

Hesitation in this sense is a process, an act. It is not the same as Husserl's epoché, which is a bracketing of everything that makes up the self and thereby reducing the subject to an open object that has no presuppositions. Epoché denies the sources and branches of what one is and one's context and background, history. In this, it is violent as it begins the process of understanding with a purge of what is individual in order to hold on to the illusion of objectivity. Active hesitation is the opposite. Instead of denying one's problematic past and present that muddies the water and makes it impossible to see anything but with one's own eyes, the process of active hesitation takes in and accepts all those contexts and manners of being all at once. The messiness of life, being all opposites at the same time, being more than any one definition, more than the name you give

<sup>23</sup> This is how I understand Nietzsche's fundamental question of the 'Revaluation of All Values' that he posited in his planned publication just before the onset of his madness.

yourself and that is given to you – all of this forms the foundation for a place from which one can start the process of non-critical understanding.

Take for instance the case of racism. Many approaches to the problem of racism are critical in nature, they continue to promote and are based on and act within difference. Because, any course of action that denies the fundamental difference upon which racism is founded, as well as actions that try to overcome these differences by giving out a new paradigm in which the difference simply does not or no longer exists, perform a violence to those suffering from and living with the consequences of racism. Reality cannot be rethought or made anew by changing words, by erasing concepts. And trauma that is repressed in this way only grows in new and more devastating ways.

An act of active hesitation on the other hand would require us to live with these differences, with the fact of all the pain and the troublesome positions that exist whether I want them to or not, both the positions and attitudes that are mine and the ones that can never be mine. Active hesitation is hard work, it is neither a denial nor a sugarcoating,<sup>24</sup> it is a withdrawal in the sense of not allowing the system that one knows as reality to be the only possibility. In the case of injustice there cannot be justice by taking away the root of the experienced trauma. It is being with the history of oppression, being with the color of my own skin and the consequences of that fact, being with the system as it is and being with the responsibility that lies on my own shoulders as a participant in these systems, being with the actions that are necessary. This is what it means to engage within the borderspace... to refuse the definitions that are thrown upon us by means of the world, to take away the verdict of what is the limit, of not having to take a decision between things even if they contradict one another. In the borderspace it is possible to learn to live with and within contradictions.

<sup>24</sup> See: Layla F. Saad, *Me, and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World* (London: Quercus Editions, 2020).

The hesitation does not mean that we hesitate to call something by its name. The hesitation lies in the fact that we don't limit something to the name we have given something, not limit anything to the judgment I've passed onto it due to my upbringing, experiences, education, etc. We open up those judgments and accept that there are more sides and that my own take, although valid, is not more or less valid than any other judgment. Within the borderspace, what is mine and what is not, fades. I am not becoming other people; the I cannot appropriate the non-I that resides with the I in the borderspace. But this being-with is what is key. Understanding then becomes a slow process of being in conversation within the borderspace, where I become as alien to myself as the non-I that together with the I makes up the borderspace. The limits of the I and the non-I do not disappear or become meaningless, but these limits are no longer the essence of what exists. As Ettinger explains, in the matrixial borderspace there is a transsubjective relationality which is a "relations-without-relating to the other based on re-tuning of distances-in-proximity".<sup>25</sup> As such the human subject is not a subjugation but should be understood as a carrying, as a carried-cared-for being.<sup>26</sup>

In this respect the difference between empathy and compassion as noted by Ettinger is important.<sup>27</sup> Empathy is the capability of someone to feel what another is feeling, which is entirely based on the notions that reside in the empathic person. What is presented in the other somehow relates to something in me, a recognition, which makes it possible for me to feel what the other feels. Yet this is entirely based on my notions, my way of looking at things. I can have empathy without the other being involved. Empathy is thus a selfish mechanism, doubling one's own experience and reliving one's own trauma.

<sup>25</sup> Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Birgit M. Kaiser & Kathrin Thiele, "If You Do Well, Carry! The Difference of the Humane: An Interview with Bracha L. Ettinger", *philoSOPHIA*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Winter 2018, p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> Bracha Ettinger, "(M)Other Re-spect: Maternal Subjectivity, the Ready-made mother-monster and The Ethics of Respecting", in *Studies in the Maternal*, 2 (1) 2010.

Compassion is different. Compassion does not require the person to understand the other, in the sense of definite knowing what is going on with the other person. I can show compassion without pretending to know, without presupposing that I can even understand what is going on with the other person, without presupposing that my own experience that relates to what I see in the other person is even somehow related. Compassion leaves the other person as is, and accepts the experience of the other person without imposing (violently) one's own world upon the other. Compassion is thus a hesitation of judgment, a way to not yet say that in order for me to do anything the other needs to fit in a box of my choosing.

While Levinas gives ethical priority to Cain as a subject always having a responsibility toward the guilt one carries with respect to the other, Ettinger invokes the example of Eve as a figure we are much more indebted to as an ethical archetype.

The difficult path to compassion begins with Eve's compassion. If the other can never be your total Other, there is an Other of the Other – in the feminine. Transcendence is therefore translucence – in the feminine. The sorrow, shame, and guilt of carrying the living and the dead can be sublimated. The conditions for the ethical attitude do not depend only upon recognizing that you are already a Cain, but also upon recognizing that you are also already an Eve as well as that you are indebted to Eve, to her birthing and her lamentation.<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusion: Possible Practices

This type of compassion, this ethics of active hesitation, requires a certain type of madness. It requires a looking toward parts of our self that have been denied due to their incongruence with the world as it is presented to us. And even though we are thrown into the world, as Heidegger puts it, that does not mean that we must be victims to the systems of knowledge that are

<sup>28</sup> Kaiser & Thiele, "If You Do Well, Carry! The Difference of the Humane: An Interview with Bracha L. Ettinger", p. 120.



forced upon us. Anne Dufourmantelle notices that this kind of risk-taking is essential to life, the foundation of what it means to be human.<sup>29</sup> Simone Weil referred to it as a conversion, becoming what we cannot behold.<sup>30</sup> This kind of madness can be found in some practices of understanding that are non-critical in its nature. They each contain a durability with the simultaneous inconsistencies of the I and the non-I, the being-with what cannot be known. As Ettinger explains:

I insist on the duration of dwelling and wit(h)nessing to achieve compassion, on the process of co/in-habit(u)ation and on the awareness to this process. To carry is also to en-dure: to sustain and support. We are here, hence we have been carried. Each one of us.<sup>31</sup>

To conclude I would like to offer some possibilities of engaging with this type of non-critical understanding. These examples serve only as openings for further research.

We could relate to philosophical compassion as a non-critical way of understanding as a kind of circumlocution.<sup>32</sup> The walking around something to understand it – not in order to approach it directly, since it is fundamentally impossible to approach. Circumlocution is the maximal kind of approaching of that which cannot be approached but neither can be left alone. A direct approach would mean a destruction, a decision on what remains at the limit of oneself; it would ask us to impose a decision. Circumlocution is a way of giving it time, of staying with it even though it remains just beyond our definite reach. It gives us understanding in the sense of a relationality, without reducing the non-I to the terms of the self.

<sup>29</sup> Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk*, translated by Stephen Miller (New York: Fordham University Press 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Nicole des Bouvrie, *The Necessity of the Impossible* (Nuenen: Exilic Press, 2019) p. 199.

<sup>31</sup> Kaiser & Thiele, "If You Do Well, Carry! The Difference of the Humane: An Interview with Bracha L. Ettinger", p. 106.

<sup>32</sup> Circumlocution can be practiced in writing, see for instance the work of Shoghi Effendi. Personal conversation with Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, Winter 2004.

Another way to make sense of philosophical compassion as a form of active hesitation is to think of it through the body itself. There is a kind of knowing while staying with the body, a knowing that cannot be approached in definite terms. The embodiment practices of dancing for instance, of prayer, of meditation are sources of understanding by staying with a concept, lingering without decision. In these embodied processes there might be a kind of active hesitation present. It is the eating that Simone Weil was referring to, that sustains being which simultaneously is and is not linked to the physicality of the body.

Alain Badiou gives some examples of experiences in which what he calls an event, can take place.<sup>33</sup> An event is a rare thing, it is a radical moment that lies outside of time, where the subject is only loyal to the outcome. Willing to give up every way of relating to the world, we can only recognize the event afterwards, since in that moment there is nothing but the change taking place. A new reality takes root in us, even though afterwards it will be impossible to think back to what the old world was like. Once we know one plus one is two, we can no longer imagine a world or a time in which this was not the case for us. Besides this kind of mathematical understanding, Badiou mentions how love can also be such an event. Love as a moment of connection that cannot be sustained, in which you lose the self without becoming the other. In the practice of love the limit of the other is easily digressed, as love is easily conflated with ownership and sacrifice, yet in essence the moment of love is nothing like that. It is a letting go of the self, regardless of the future, without presupposing what comes after. And it is at such a moment that understanding through compassion and active hesitation can come about.

Truth, then, is not a matter of decision, of claiming a ground for ourselves and defending it. Truth is that moment in which reality presents itself through borderlinking, through an opening toward that which is not me, while fragilizing the concept of what is and what is not part of me. This is the truth that can be

<sup>33</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

experienced through circumlocution, through embodiment and through acts of love. It exists outside of language and other power structures, ready to be understood whenever and wherever we are.