

Kant, the Nomad, and the Publicity of Thinking: Finding a Cure for Socrates' Narration Sickness

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KANT'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE NOMADIC SCHOLAR

Konigsberg, Prussia, 1784: A statement is published in the "Short Notices" of *Scholarly Times*, volume 12. The notice reads,

A favorite idea of Professor Kant's is that the ultimate purpose of the human race is to achieve the most perfect civic constitution, and he wishes that a philosophical historian might undertake to give us a history of humanity from this point of view, and to show to what extent humanity in various ages has approached or drawn away from this final purpose and what remains to be done in order to reach it.¹

Who published this statement, and why is it significant for Immanuel Kant and us, his readers? In a curious and rare autobiographical footnote attached to his essay title, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," Kant suggests that the notice's author remains an anonymous "scholar who was passing through." In this disclosure Kant confesses that the conversation with this stranger, now publicly revealed, "occasions" him to write the essay, "without which the statement could not be understood."² Not the conversation, which for all intents and purposes remained a private chat between scholars, but the publicity of the talk causes Kant to write the essay.

What is Kant telling us with this footnote revelation that an anonymous scholar has required him to write an essay? Is he revealing something about the process of his work? Is he indicating something about the "cunning of reason" or "ruse of nature," the peculiar way history moves behind our backs, working, teleologically, toward the realization of an ideal like perpetual peace? Or is he making another philosophical point regarding the peculiar ways we encounter ourselves, specifically, in the public realm, where we are disclosed to others? Perhaps we might learn something if we consider the implications of Kant's responding to himself, this other Professor Kant, whose idea was publicized unexpectedly by the traveling scholar. Does the unexpected publication of his talk with the stranger, and his response, the writing of an essay, tell us something about the disclosure of thinking, that is, the way thinking is born or freed into the world? What does Kant want us to make of his thought being "forced" to enter into the world by the voice of a stranger? Is he telling us something about the dialogic way that thinking is "delivered" into the public realm? Might his footnote be a signpost indicating a new path for exploring education as the practice of freedom, where dialogue is understood as the liberation of thought, the freeing of ideas from their captivity in singular minds, or singular conversations?

Kant's footnote informs us that he is compelled to respond to his own voice, which appeared to him through the voice of a stranger, an anonymous traveling scholar with whom he had discussed the cosmopolitan viewpoint. The itinerant

scholar drew Kant out of himself, positioning Kant in relation to himself. The stranger pulled Kant into a realm where he can hear himself through another's voice. The surprising encounter happens because Kant's voice is no longer his. It has been publicized, delivered into the commons where the nomadic public intellectual is moving. But the publication of this conversation is also meant for us, the readers, with whom Kant shares it. Through Kant, the anonymous scholar delivers us a message regarding the movement of liberated thinking. With his pedagogy of publication the nomadic intellectual teaches us how thinking is freed from the sovereignty of the thinker. Furthermore, the publication of his conversation with Kant reveals the dialogic disclosure of difference, dialogue as the encounter between the self and its others.

There is a curious subtext, literally, to Kant's important essay, that offers an opportunity to revisit dialogic pedagogy. Kant allows us to understand the dialogic experience as initiated by an encounter, an unexpected meeting, that initiates or creates a space for the construction and production of something new, that is, the writing of an essay. The encounter with the stranger indicates that the space for learning opens with dialogue, and that learning unfolds when we encounter our words (*logoi*) through (*dia*) the stranger who confronts and challenges us to hear them differently. The encounter discloses publicity. What I emphasize here is not the space that opens, but learning as the estranging encounter with "our" publicized voice. Learning dialogically happens with the reception of the new sound of our "own" thinking when it is delivered into the public realm.

Kant helps us to recognize that dialogic learning occurs when we are challenged to hear our own voice in strange new ways. Understood dialogically, learning is the liberation of thinking, or the circulation of ideas operating under the principle of publicity. When our ideas are circulated through dialogue they move in the public domain in such a way that they are no longer ours. In turn, the dialogic encounter discloses learning to be the experience with liberated thinking, with thinking that is no longer experienced as self-contained. Thus dialogue teaches by circulating voice, delivering it into the public realm and allowing it to move independently of the speaker. Learning is the encounter with this publicized voice that circulates as an other, distinct and different from the voice we originally heard when we spoke. Put differently, dialogic learning is an encounter with liberated thought. In dialogue, thinking is freed from the limits of intentionality; that is, learning happens when thinking is liberated from the confines of the thinker, from the internal monologue, the self-contained process. In this way, dialogue "teaches" freedom: through dialogue we learn that we are free insofar as we encounter our voice as always distinct and different from the ways we hear it as our own. In this sense, dialogue frees or liberates self from the possession of the "I." This problem of self-possession is conveyed in the archaic usage of the word "ourself," which was used instead of "myself" by a sovereign or person of authority. The dialogic encounter liberates the self from the possessive force of "our." As with Kant's conversation with the traveling scholar, dialogue has the power to turn us around to an unexpected meeting with the self as a stranger, allowing us to understand thinking as always exceeding

the control of the will. Dialogue reveals thought to be like the shadow that we cast, always with us but changing in ways beyond our control. Thus, in the dialogic educational encounter freedom appears as the liberation of thought from the thinker.

SOCRATES' NARRATION SICKNESS

Athens, Greece, 399 BCE: At a crucial moment in his historic defense before the Athenians Socrates explains that his practice as a teacher to engage in small group dialogue, with a preference for one-on-one conversation, has always been directed by “something divine and daimonic” that comes to him. “A voice... This is something which began for me in childhood: a sort of voice comes, and whenever it comes, it always turns me away from whatever I am about to do, but never turns me forward.”³ In the multiple references that Socrates makes to the divine voice, his *daimon*, he tells us that this spirit appears unexpectedly and, as it were, paralyzes him. He is turned around, abruptly, from whatever he was engaged in, or perhaps intending to do. In the *Phaedrus* he talks of his “familiar divine sign — which always checks me when on the point of doing something or other — and all at once I seemed to hear a voice, forbidding me to leave the spot until I had made atonement for some offense to heaven.”⁴ As unusual and disruptive as they were, these divine interventions, as we might call them, were so much a part of his character that Euthyphro at one point tells him, “I understand, Socrates; it’s because you assert that the *daimonion* comes to you on occasion.”⁵ In fact, Socrates’ *daimon* was such a powerful guiding force in his practice that it would, in some instances, forbid him from reengaging a former student, as was the case with Aristides. “With others,” he tells us, “it is permitted, and these begin again to make progress.”⁶

If we read Socrates’ autobiographical accounts within the context of my presentation of dialogue and the liberation of thinking, we arrive at the provocative conclusion that Socrates appears unfit to practice dialogic pedagogy, because his thinking remains under the possession of his *daimon*. Starting the diagnosis from the symptoms he shares, we recall Socrates confessing “I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me.”⁷ Socrates’ account of his condition as incapable of giving birth to wisdom is taken up here as the chronic condition of many so-called dialogic teachers who, upon close examination, are unfit to practice this pedagogy because they suffer from various forms of monologism, which is the malady of a thinking that remains captive within the thinker, or, more precisely, a pedagogy that remains under control of the pedagogue. Like Socrates, these “unfit” teachers suffer from a chronic condition that requires immediate attention and care. Indeed, this essay is an attempt to locate a “cure” for this silent disease that undermines the good intentions of self-identified dialogic teachers. In the search for a remedy we will take up the case of Socrates and his *daimon*.

What exactly is this malady, this chronic illness that holds back the voice of the dialogic teacher? If we return to our review of Kant, it seems clear that what made his a dialogic encounter was, in part, his capacity to recognize that he no longer retained control over the movement of his thinking. Like Socrates, Kant was at one

time incapable of giving birth to wisdom. Here we remember another of Kant's rare autobiographical moments, where he describes his precritical work, or preliberated thinking, as the philosophical equivalent of somnambulism. Kant discloses his curative encounter: "I openly confess, the suggestion of David Hume was the very thing, which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber, and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy quite a new direction."⁸ Given the cure offered by Hume to Kant, might Socrates have benefited from the "healing services" of another dialogic teacher?

A proper diagnosis of Socrates' condition would begin by identifying his malady as an advanced case of what Paulo Freire describes as "narration sickness":

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally *narrative* character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness.⁹

Freire's description of the illness reveals that narration sickness is caused by a blighted system. So we could say that Socrates was made sick by what Foucault calls "the deficiencies of education." He suffered from a lack of education, from philosophic malnourishment. Like Kant, whose illness was the result of his over consumption of the metaphysics of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff, Socrates suffered under the steady diet of monologue, consuming without question the authority of his *daimon*. Like Kant, Socrates was made ill by dogma. This is certainly an ironic, if not tragic, condition for one who Foucault identifies as a healer, a teacher whose practice has "a curative and therapeutic function. It is much closer to the medical model than the pedagogical model." Foucault shows that Socrates' (so-called) dialogic practice must be understood in the wider sense of "healing the diseases of the soul." In this sense "care of the self was essential because of the deficiencies of education; it was a matter of perfecting the latter or of taking charge of it one-self." As a healer Socrates cured his students in their deficiency in thinking by enabling them to see the complexity of belief. With a pharmacology of the ancient practices *epimeleia heautou*, *cura sui*, which he translates as "care of the self," Foucault reminds us that "philosophy's role is to heal the diseases of the soul." Socrates is a progenitor of this tradition insofar as he was a teacher of self-concern, "the man who takes care that his fellow citizens 'take care of themselves'." What Foucault overlooks, however, is that Socrates initiated a practice that he was himself unable to take up. Socrates, the one who takes care that his fellow citizens take care of themselves, performed the role of the philosophic healer who remained afflicted with a disease of the soul. This disease, according to Socrates' account, restricted him from giving birth to wisdom.¹⁰

If we turn to Hannah Arendt, however, Socrates' illness is not a condition of infertility but one of impotence brought on by an enlarged will. Drawing on Augustine, Arendt describes this as a

disease of the mind, [Augustine] also admits that this disease is, as it were, natural for a mind possessed of a will... Hence, the will is both powerful and impotent, free and unfree. Because of the will's impotence, its capacity to generate genuine power, its constant defeat in the

struggle with the self, in which the power of the I-can exhausted itself, the will-to-power turned at once into a will-to-oppression.¹¹

Arendt helps us to understand why Socrates' inability to experience the freedom of thinking is related to an enlarged will, a faculty swollen to the unhealthy state of "will-to-power."¹² This swelling produced impotence, a loss of the will's power to assist in the birth of thinking. Thus, narration sickness is rooted in the will-to-oppression, which traps thinking within the monologic circle of "our-self." With this disease of the mind, the will dominates to the point of oppressing the faculty of thought. If we follow Arendt's diagnosis, a cure for this illness would require a significant "draining" of the will's power, such that the natural relation between will and self¹³ would be sustained, and the proper balance between the faculties of willing and thinking would be restored. Indeed, this would restore the balance between the unfree will, which always remains under the bondage of the self, and the freedom of thought. Thinking, in contrast to willing, is a dialogue that develops *in* the self, but remains distinct *from* the self. In turn, the "natural" outcome of the internal dialogue, where "the self is not the object of the activity of thought,"¹⁴ is the birth of thinking freed into the publicity of dialogue, where it can grow in relation to, but independent of, the thinker.

Now that we understand his condition, it becomes clear that Socrates' mission to find someone "truly wise" was an attempt to locate a teacher who could heal him, who could "drain" his swollen will-to-power, which manifested itself with the presence of his overbearing *daimon*, and was expressed in his incessant questioning, his will-to-oppress the free movement of thinking, and control the movement of dialogue. His defense before the Athenians can now be understood as the narrative of a sick man in search of a cure.

At a crucial moment in his defense Socrates informs his judges that his unshakeable faith in his teaching practice is grounded in the guidance he received from his *daimon*. His *daimon* is, without question, the defining force of his practice. He is duty bound to it, in the manner of a subject who serves a higher authority, a sovereign. What do we learn about Socrates' illness from his reflections on his *daimon*? First and foremost, we learn that his narration sickness is brought on from childhood by the appearance of this overpowering subject. His *daimon* renders him a passive, listening object by regularly disciplining him, at times even compelling him to turn his back on his students who return for more healing. The *daimon* was, in effect, a narrating teacher whom Socrates was compelled to obey, much like students sickened by the deficiency disease caused by exposure to what Freire calls "banking education." This is the insidious nature of banking education: it lulls the student to dwell "comfortably" with the one-sidedness of opinion (*doxa* as *dogma*). The banking educator "teaches" the student to obey the authority of the singular voice (the banking educator's "thought"), to become monologic, equating thinking with the singular authority of the thinker who "possesses" her/his thoughts. Here again we see the irony, if not tragedy, of Socrates' illness: he was able to help deliver thinking into the world, but remained under the sterile command of his *daimon*. He never experienced the freedom of the very dialogic practice he orchestrated for

others, the liberation of one who is freed from the monologism of “I-will” otherwise identified as will-to-oppression. He was bound to himself by a voice that only he heard. The subjugation he thus endured is akin to his experience with the dominating voice of the Delphic Oracle, which drives him on his mission that, as he tells us in his apology, he will not give up before his last breath. With this reading we can now understand the real tragedy of his death: he was unable to attain the liberation he offered to others.

We recall that Kant’s voice was returned to him anew when it appeared unexpectedly in the public realm. Repositioned by the publicity of his voice, his thinking was delivered into that realm of publicity, and he was compelled to write his essay. Kant was compelled to recognize the truth that his thought is always moving beyond him, independent of his will and self; he was compelled to recognize the phenomenal character of liberated thinking. Here the famous Kantian distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* is identified as the oppressive, antidialogic character of the will-to-power: monologism understood as the error of solipsism, in contrast to the phenomenal disclosure of thinking in dialogue. The publication of the conversation released Kant’s thinking from being in-and-for-itself (*noumena*). If *noumena* is rooted in *noien* (to apprehend), then we can understand why dialogue releases thinking from the captivity of the self or subject. Dialogue is the phenomenal disclosure of thought that emancipates it from the sovereignty of the authoritative self. Thought unbounded moves beyond the authority of the thinker, and with this phenomenal appearance something new is born into the world. We call this appearance of the new that happens with freed thought *learning*.

THE HEALING OF SOCRATES

Our examination of Socrates’ “health” leads to a different understanding of his so-called ignorance, expressed in the famous lines from the *Apology*:

But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless.¹⁵

We recognize now that this is neither an expression of irony, nor of humility. Rather, it is an expression of the debilitating effects of narration sickness: the impossibility of his speaking freely.¹⁶ As we have seen, Socrates’ self-proclaimed inability to give birth to wisdom is not a result of “infertility.” He was, as these lines from his defense make clear, held back by the narration sickness he endured from constant exposure to voices of swollen power, voices that arrived from a *noumenal* region and, thereby, remained beyond critical inspection. Like Kant, Socrates required healing, an interruption of the dogmatic voices of authority to enable his thinking to be born into the world.

Curing Socrates requires the kind of encounter that Kant experienced with the itinerant scholar. Indeed, Socrates’ relationship with his *daimon* would need to be disrupted to achieve a critical distance such that he would be unable to hear this familiar spirit as his own. The cure I am recommending could produce a new

relationship *with the daimon*. I am following Arendt's reading of this ancient idea, defining the *daimon* as each person's unique personal identity that appears through acting and speaking. Arendt calls this the disclosure of who somebody is, and says it "corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique human being among equals."¹⁷ This makes it clear that the dialogic experience is a fundamental component of the human condition, that the disclosure of who someone is requires dialogue. Arendt notes that this uniqueness "can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity,"¹⁸ or, as I argued, when the soul has fallen ill with narration sickness. Curing this illness is not simply a matter of speaking, but of disclosing the new through the liberation of thought from the thinker. We might call this the disclosure of plurality: the appearance of uniqueness embodied with each who that is disclosed, not simply as distinct from each other, but as distinct from the self, from the will to sovereignty, which manifests externally as the will to control the movement of ideas. To disclose a who and embody plurality is to be liberated from identity, from the sovereignty of the self over itself, from the oppression of the inner dialogue where thinking is held captive. Disclosure delivered dialogically reveals the plurality of thought by freeing it into the dynamic movement of publicity. Understood this way, disclosure actualizes the plurality inherent in each voice.

Thought freed into publicity is liberated from the oppression of the self, from the will that always attempts to predetermine and control the unpredictable and spontaneous movement of thinking. Thought freed into publicity is delivered as plurality. As Arendt puts it, "disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this 'who'."¹⁹ Rather, as we learned from Kant's conversation with the traveling scholar, the disclosure of the who someone is reveals a self that is beyond the control of the one who is revealed. Plurality is disclosed and revealed to all who experience dialogic learning. Here Arendt's understanding of the *daimon*, as a spirit that lingers mysteriously, addresses the cure we might prescribe for Socrates: "the 'who' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters."²⁰ What Socrates required most of all was an encounter that disrupted the familiar voice, and, thereby, turned him around so that he might receive the distinctiveness and plurality of his own voice, publicized and circulated by others. But to be fully cured Socrates would need to stop listening to that familiar voice of questioning, namely his own will-to-control the movement of the dialogue, and thereby become a student among students. Such a shift to the modality that Freire calls the "teacher-student" would have enabled him to receive the voices of others, and thus to see the world from a plurality of perspectives. In effect, the shift could have enabled him to let go of the healing practice as *his* art, and thus recognize that it is dialogue itself, independent of the will of the teacher and students, that delivers thinking into the world. Letting go of ownership of the delivery process might have separated him from that familiar voice, that spirit which possessed him with its

singular vision. With this letting go and letting be of dialogue Socrates might have been opened up to receive freed thought, through the movement of publicity that is always happening in strange and unexpected ways beyond our control. Socrates would have become, like Kant, ready to learn from the encounter with the nomadic movement of thinking.

1. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View," *Immanuel Kant Philosophical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 1986), 249.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Plato, *Apology*, in *Four Texts on Socrates*, trans. and eds. Thomas G. and Grace Starry West (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1984), 31d. On Socrates' *daimonion*, the "daimonic something" that comes to him, see *Apology* 40a-c, *Euthyphro* 3b, *Republic* 496c, *Theaetetus* 151a, *Phaedrus* 242b-c, *Ethydemus* 272e, and *Theages* 128d-31a (the latter is an extended account). See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I.1.2-9; and Plato, *Apology* 12-3, 83, fn 56.

4. *Ibid.*, 242c.

5. Plato, *Euthyphro* 3b.

6. Plato, *Theaetetus* 151a.

7. *Ibid.*, 150c.

8. Immanuel Kant, "Preface" to *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1977), 5.

9. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000), 71 (emphasis in original).

10. Michel Foucault, "The Hermeneutic of the Subject," in *Ethics, Subjectivity, Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 97, 96, and 93.

11. Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 161-2.

12. It is important to note that the "swollen will" should not be confused with Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power," which Martin Heidegger describes as "resolute openness toward itself, as mastery out beyond itself, because will is a willing beyond itself, it is the strength that is able to bring itself to power." Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 1: Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper, 1991), 42.

13. "The I-will can never rid itself of the self; it always remains bound to it and, indeed, under its bondage." Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" 162.

14. *Ibid.*, 162-3.

15. Plato, *Apology* 23b.

16. This impossibility of Socrates speaking freely is a leitmotif of the entire *Apology*, beginning with his opening statement on the "foreign dialect" he will use in his defense. He is bound by his language, and asks the court to indulge him while he speaks "in the same language which it has been my habit to use, both in the open spaces of this city — where many of you have heard me — and elsewhere..." (*Ibid.*, 17c).

17. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178.

18. *Ibid.*, 179.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 179-80.