

Awareness of Boundaries



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The history of philosophy could be told as a story of boundary-crossing, of transgressions. But it could also be a story about the denial of their existence. Or, it could be a tale about power or a lament over helplessness. The most important thing is that the tone changes everything.

In ontology, the concept of a boundary is inextricably linked to the question of what exists. In epistemology, in turn, it is linked to reflections on the scope of human cognitive capacities. In both cases, awareness of the existence of boundaries is very important because all philosophical reflection is a transition from what appears obvious, towards what marks out some kind of limit, thus defining the area of possible research. Practically from the very beginning, such deliberations have been made against the backdrop of the suspicion that when trying to function within the boundless, we are unable to grasp not only the whole, but even the small fragment of that whole that may be accessible to us.

The concept of the boundless appeared already in the deliberations of Anaximander of Miletus (who Diogenes Laërtius tells us lived between 611 and 546 BC). When asked about the first principle (*arche*) of things, he answered that it was not any of the elements, but rather the *apeiron*, or the boundless. He taught that only parts changed, whereas the whole remained unchanged. From the scant information that has been preserved, we can deduce that this whole determines the horizon of cognition, defining its partiality. The boundlessness of reality cannot be grasped by the human mind, which itself has limits resulting from many factors. But can we conceive of a boundless mind? One that can transform chaos into cosmos and disorder into order?

Even if such a boundless mind exists, it is not human. Anaxagoras (500–428 BC) began his work with the assertion: “All things were together; then came Mind and set them in order.” Understood in this way, the mind (*nous*) is the basic force that governs the universe, making it a whole that is rational and therefore possible to understand. According to Anaxagoras, it is the mind that is the cause of all motion and it is the mind that causes heavy objects to fall down and light-weight objects to rise up – it is the mind that directs

the movement of the stars in the sky, stirs the wind, and makes the sun rise. But if the laws of the mind are omnipresent and govern everything, what about the gods? Shouldn’t they have the final say? Don’t they bear the burden of responsibility for the universal order? It comes as no surprise that Anaxagoras’s concept led to him being charged with impiety, fined, and exiled. Diogenes Laërtius reported that when the philosopher heard the sentence that had been imposed upon him, he shrugged and replied, “Already long ago, nature condemned both my judges and me to death.”

The case of Anaxagoras highlights both the question of the boundlessness of the cosmic mind, constantly confronted with the individual human mind, and the question of boundaries between spheres of influence, between the domain of scientific thinking and religious revelation. From the outset, philosophy, described by Bertrand Russell as a “No Man’s Land” lying “between science and theology,” has had a tendency not only to balance on this thin line, but also to cross it and to call it into question. In some cases, it proved possible to preserve this line through clever tricks that rendered onto god or gods the things that belonged to them. But there were also moments in history when discoveries came into radical conflict with religion, which usually ended very badly for those who not so much questioned God’s omnipotence as drew attention to the laws governing the world that could be rationally proven.

Apart from the boundary between revealed truth and scientific truth, a fundamental role in epistemology is played not only by the limits of human cognition, but also by the importance of our awareness of their existence. A sense of humility in the face of the infinity of the cosmos does not mean giving up exploring its mysteries. One of the most important boundaries is the one between the subject and the object of cognition. Which of them is active in the cognitive process? In other words, is it man that explores the world, tirelessly unraveling its mysteries, or is it the world that always presents itself to man on its own terms, revealing itself? Is it the subject that formulates questions? Or the world that provides answers? The conviction that there is an immobile dividing line held strong in philosophy until the 18th century – more specifically,



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until Immanuel Kant staged what he himself modestly described as a “Copernican” revolution. Ending once and for all the debate between empiricists and rationalists, he concluded that in the process of cognition the subject and the object actually mutually determine one other – the concept makes experience possible, but at the same time it is experience that constitutes the point of departure for the concept. That was one of the reasons why the subject of cognition should be aware of its own limits and realize that he or she is referring only to phenomena, not to the things in themselves that mark out the limits of possibilities. Noumena, which are the limits of cognition, at the same time determine its very possibility. As transcendent ideas of pure reason (God, soul, the universe), they organize the whole and give it immanent meaning.

On the one hand, it turns out that the boundaries of philosophical reflection define an extremely broad area. On the other hand, this area proves as narrow as

individual human consciousness. If we take a closer look, we will see a boundary between individual subjects that cannot be crossed even with the most profound desire to communicate. In this context, we can talk about experiencing the impossibility of communication, repeating after Ludwig Wittgenstein that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”

When we delve even deeper into the microcosm of human existence, we will see in Karl Jaspers’s philosophy that certain experiences – death, struggle, chance, and guilt – confront us with our own existence and cause us to understand the limits of individual possibilities, suffering, mortality, beyond which we are left only with the unexplored motion of transcendence. Even if the cause of all things is infinite, as Anaximander wished it to be, all considerations are inevitably coupled with an awareness of the boundary that we all carry within us and that we cannot share with anyone. ■