

Zen, Metaphor and Ethics

Forgetting as the Origin of Conflict

Perhaps the fundamental problem of the human being is not thinking, but forgetting that one thinks.

Introduction

Two people are arguing about an issue. At first, they exchange arguments, but little by little they stop discussing ideas and begin defending themselves, until the other person ceases to be someone who thinks differently and becomes someone who is simply wrong. The story shows how the same process, amplified at the social level, can eventually lead to persecution, war, or extermination. What has happened?

Ideas do not fire rifles, and words do not produce violence by themselves. How, then, can we explain the fact that they seem to appear again and again at the origin of so many conflicts? Perhaps the problem lies in the way they come to be experienced. There is a moment, difficult to pinpoint, when a word ceases to be recognised as the representation that it is and begins to be confused with reality itself.

From very different perspectives, Western and Eastern philosophy seem to have identified this same phenomenon: the human tendency to forget the difference between thought and reality. This essay brings these traditions into dialogue in order to explore what happens when thought ceases to recognise itself as representation and begins to be confused with the reality it seeks to represent.

Could this forgetting lie at the origin of a large part of human conflict?

I. Thought as Representation

In 1933, Alfred Korzybski, in *Science and Sanity*, formulated a statement that became one of the fundamental principles of General Semantics and, over time, an expression widely known far beyond that field: “*The map is not the territory*”.

The statement seems trivial. No one literally confuses a map with a forest. Yet we continually confuse our representations of the world with the world itself.

Concepts function as maps. Theories function as maps. Religions, ideologies and sciences also function as maps. A map is not false because it is not the territory; precisely because it simplifies reality, it can help us find our way through it. The problem begins when we forget the difference. Korzybski was not proposing that we abandon maps, but that we constantly remember their abstract nature. This idea provides the starting point for the journey developed in these pages.

Nietzsche took this question a step further. In *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, he presents a conception of truth closely linked to metaphor. “*What, then, is truth?*” the philosopher asks, answering:

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A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms. In short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transmitted, embellished with poetry and rhetoric, and which, after long use, appear to a people as fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors that have become worn out and have lost their sensuous force, coins that have lost their image and are now considered only as metal, but no longer as coins.

Concepts are born as metaphors, human attempts to orient ourselves within a reality that is always richer than any description of it. With time, we forget this origin, and the metaphor ceases to be perceived as metaphor. It acquires ontological consistency: it ceases to point towards something and begins to occupy the place of that which it once pointed towards. It becomes truth.

Jacques Derrida developed this line of thought further by showing that Western philosophy has frequently forgotten the metaphorical origin of many of its concepts. In his essay *White Mythology*, he points out that the distinction between literal and metaphorical language is never as clear as we tend to imagine. Even the most abstract philosophical concepts retain traces of ancient metaphors whose origins have become hidden.

Metaphors, then, constitute a permanent condition of thought. There is no vantage point from which we can completely abandon representations and contemplate reality “as it is.” Every meaning refers to other meanings, and every act of understanding inevitably remains mediated by language.

This observation does not invalidate the distinction between representation and reality. On the contrary, it makes awareness of that distinction even more necessary. Precisely because we cannot cease thinking through representations, the danger lies in forgetting their constructed nature and ultimately confusing them with reality itself.

Emmanuel Lizcano develops these ideas from a perspective particularly close to the purpose of this essay in his book *Metáforas que nos piensan* (*Metaphors That Think Us*). His proposal is especially suggestive:

We do not merely use metaphors to understand the world; to a considerable extent, they are also what organise our way of thinking about it.

In other words, metaphors are not merely linguistic devices. They form part of the very structure through which we interpret reality. This is why they organise economics (“the market moves”), politics (“the left and the right”), science (“the genetic code”), psychology (“mental mechanisms”) and argumentation (“defending an idea”). Even before any conscious reflection takes place, we inhabit a world already configured by images and representations that orient the way we perceive and understand reality.

Continuing this line of thought, Lizcano pays particular attention to the difference between living metaphors—those whose figurative nature remains visible—and dead metaphors—those whose metaphorical origins have become hidden. The former continue to show themselves as a way of looking at reality rather than reality itself. The latter, by contrast, have ceased to be recognised as metaphors and come to be experienced as objective descriptions of the world.

II. The Net and the Limits of Language

Ludwig Wittgenstein, pursuing a different purpose, also draws attention to the relationship between language and reality. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein maintains that a proposition is a picture (*Bild*) of reality. Language does not reproduce the world; it represents it. Between words and that of which they speak there always remains a distance that no description can completely eliminate.

This idea is condensed in one of his best-known statements: “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*” Wittgenstein thus connects the limits of what we can say with the limits of what we can describe and think.

The metaphor of the net offers a particularly suggestive image of this relationship. Wittgenstein imagines a mesh cast over the world to show how different systems of description allow us to organise the same reality in different ways. We can construct nets with different mesh sizes and consequently obtain different descriptions of the same reality. None of these nets belongs to the world itself; they are instruments through which we describe it. The different nets do not alter reality; they alter the way in which it can be described. The regularities we discover tell us as much about the world as they do about the way in which we have organised it in order to understand it.

The problem does not lie in using a net—or a language, a theory or a metaphor—since all understanding seems to require some form of representation. The problem begins when we forget that we can only access reality through these nets and end up confusing the net with what it seeks to reveal.

Wittgenstein himself later shifted his reflections from representation towards language games, showing that the meaning of words depends upon their use and upon the forms of life in which they occur. Although this shift belongs to a different stage of his thought, it retains the same warning: language is not a transparent mirror of reality.

Wittgenstein, read in this way, does not call for abandoning language. He points instead to its limits. That recognition opens, in a surprising way, a dialogue with Eastern thought, where awareness of the limits of language and thought also constitutes a starting point rather than a conclusion.

III. Eastern Thought and the Representation of Reality

The ideas encountered in Korzybski, Nietzsche, Lizcano, Derrida and Wittgenstein find a particularly significant development in Eastern thought. From Laozi to Zen, the same warning appears: we forget that representations are only representations.

The *Dao De Jing* begins with words that run through the entire Chinese tradition:

The Dao that can be named is not the eternal Dao.

For Laozi, language has a limited value. Words point towards reality, but they can never exhaust it. The Dao cannot be identified with the representation that words make of it. The problem arises when we forget this limitation. The name then ceases to be experienced as a representation and begins to be confused with the reality towards which it points. Thought ceases to notice the distance between the two and ends up moving within its own representations as though they were reality itself.

Zhuangzi radicalises this suspicion through stories and paradoxes. The most famous says:

Once I dreamed that I was a butterfly. When I awoke, I did not know whether I was Zhuangzi who had dreamed of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that it was Zhuangzi.

The point is not to decide which of the two possibilities is correct. The story undermines our confidence in our habitual distinctions between dream and waking, subject and object, reality and appearance.

In another passage, Zhuangzi discusses with Hui Shi the happiness of fish. The discussion ends by showing that both interlocutors are trapped within different conceptual assumptions. The problem lies in remaining enclosed within a position that is taken to be absolute. Zhuangzi uses humour and paradox to prevent his own words from becoming doctrine. In a sense, he is a great preserver of living metaphors.

With Nāgārjuna we enter Mahāyāna Buddhism. His method consists in showing that any statement about ultimate reality leads to contradictions when taken as an absolute description. He does not simply say that things are empty. Emptiness itself is empty. His philosophy therefore cannot coherently become a new metaphysics. Whenever a position attempts to crystallise, dialectic dissolves it. Nāgārjuna acts as a systematic solvent of dead metaphors.

Zen has traditionally expressed this orientation, which points to the limits of words and concepts in reaching reality, in one of its best-known teachings, attributed to Bodhidharma:

A special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters, pointing directly to the human being; seeing one's own nature and realising Buddhahood.

This makes the limits of language evident. It is not a rejection of words, but a recognition that they cannot transmit, ground or replace the reality towards which they point.

Eastern tradition seems to be oriented towards a transformation of our relationship with reality rather than towards the development of a more precise language, deeper concepts or more convincing arguments.

IV. Satori and the End of Forgetting

At the heart of Zen lies *satori*. Zen masters, however, rarely attempt to define it. Instead of saying what it is, they tend to point towards what happens when it occurs and towards the consequences that follow from it. They say, for example, that in *satori* reality as it is becomes clearly revealed. At the same time, they insist that it is not an intellectual understanding, a conviction reached through reflection, the cessation of thoughts, or a state without thought. *Satori* is described as a radical transformation in the way reality is seen.

In this sense, *satori* is not presented as a new interpretation of reality but as an experience in which reality reveals itself as it is. This essay cannot verify that claim, nor does it attempt to describe such an experience. It proposes only one possibility: if, as has been suggested throughout these pages, thought is essentially representational and the problem lies not in representing but in forgetting this quality, then an experience that allowed reality to be seen as it is would make it impossible to maintain that forgetting. Consequently, such an experience could not consist of a new description or a new interpretation, since both would remain representations.

Or, seen from another perspective, suppose that after *satori* someone continued to confuse their thoughts with reality. In that case, the experience would not have altered precisely that which had

prevented them from seeing reality as it is. *Satori* would then be reduced to a new interpretation of reality, something that Zen masters themselves explicitly deny because, in that case, *satori* would not exist.

After *satori*, the map would once again simply be a map, and the territory would cease to be hidden behind our descriptions. Metaphors would continue to exist, but they would never cease to be metaphors. Zen summarises this transformation in the relationship between thought and reality with great simplicity in the well-known saying:

Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.

Facts do not change; they remain the same. What changes is our relationship to everything that thought constructs around them. In the sense in which this essay uses the term “representation”—whether words, concepts, meanings, explanations, or evaluations—we can distinguish between what happens and the representations that thought constructs about it. In this context, when we speak of a fact, we do not mean something isolated from experience or independent of the functioning of the organism. A fact is always embodied, together with visual perception, sounds, smells, sensations, and the other functions through which the organism relates to what happens, in a concrete and unrepeatable situation. For example:

- chopping wood: fact
- “it is hard work”: representation
- “it is a humble task”: representation
- “it is a spiritual practice”: representation
- “it is a waste of time”: representation

In this case, “chopping wood” ceases to be hidden behind the meanings that thought constructs around that fact. The representations remain, but once again they are experienced as representations. The map remains, but it no longer takes the place of the territory.

We can find a similar distinction in the way we think about temporal succession. Imagine a cup sitting on a table. We pick it up and place it somewhere else. In describing what happened, we say: “Before, the cup was on the table, and afterwards we placed it somewhere else.”

But what exactly are this “before” and “after”? They are not something that can be pointed to alongside the cup. What appears is a cup in one position and, in another situation, the cup in a different position. “Before” and “after” are concepts through which thought relates these two situations.

The difference can be expressed as follows:

- a cup in one position: fact
- a cup in another position: fact

and, on the other hand:

- “before”: representation
- “after”: representation

Succession itself is already a way of relating these two facts. Alongside the cup, we do not find a thing called “temporal succession.” Thought establishes between them a relationship of anteriority and posteriority and expresses that relationship through concepts such as “before” and “after.”

At this point a more radical question arises: does temporal succession really exist independently of the forms through which thought organises experience, or is succession itself a construction of thought? What we call “before” and “after” may not be something we find in reality but rather a way in which thought establishes relationships between what appears. In this way, time, understood as the succession of a before and an after, belongs to the realm of representations rather than to reality itself.

Also in this case, the difference between the fact and what thought adds to it is forgotten. Just as “it is hard work,” “it is a humble task,” or “it is a spiritual practice” is added to the fact of chopping wood, the relationship of anteriority and posteriority is also added to what appears. Once this difference is forgotten, the representation ceases to be experienced as something added by thought and begins to be experienced as a property of what appears.

Perhaps this is the most radical consequence of *satori*: thought continues, but without our forgetting its metaphorical nature and without metaphors ever being allowed to die.

Here Nietzsche’s intuition that truths are metaphors which we have forgotten are metaphors acquires a special significance. If that formulation described the habitual functioning of thought, the effect of *satori* might consist precisely in this forgetting never occurring again.

V. Ethics and the Absence of a Correct Attitude

If the interpretation developed in these pages is correct, an unexpected consequence emerges: Zen cannot provide a foundation for morality or ethics.

This may seem strange from a Western perspective, where we tend to identify spiritual transformation with the development of certain virtues. Yet a conversation between a Zen master and his disciple offers another way of understanding the matter.

Disciple: What happens if someone says to me, “You’re an idiot”?

Master: There is “you’re an idiot,” and it disappears. If you think “what?,” that also disappears. If there is “you’re so intelligent,” that disappears as well. Even if you think, “really?,” that too disappears. Therefore there is nothing to be done, and there is no correct attitude that you must develop or maintain.

The answer is disconcerting because it seems to invalidate any attempt to cultivate virtues. Yet perhaps it does not deny the possibility of kindness or compassion. What it seems to deny is something more profound: even the image of “the correct attitude” can become another representation with which we ultimately identify.

The moment the mind creates a model of the “correct attitude” and identifies with it, that model ceases to function as a representation and begins to be lived as reality. Even the idea of “being compassionate” can crystallise and become the standard by which we judge others and ourselves. Zen does not seem to call virtue itself into question. What it calls into question is the process through which any representation ceases to be recognised as representation.

All conflict begins long before the first blow. It begins at the moment when a representation ceases to be recognised as representation and comes to be confused with reality. Once this confusion has occurred, the other person no longer thinks differently: they are simply wrong. From this way of experiencing the situation, persuading, correcting or educating someone who thinks differently appears entirely reasonable. No personal threat needs to be felt; it is enough to believe that one sees reality while the person who thinks differently remains in error.

When that conviction intensifies and sufficient power is available, persuasion can become coercion, and coercion can become violence. All of them are manifestations of the same mechanism: the forgetting that our representations are only representations.

If the effect of *satori* consisted in preventing that forgetting from occurring, this mechanism would lose its foundation. This is why Zen does not say “be peaceful.” It points instead to the process through which violence becomes possible. From this perspective, both violence and non-violence belong to the realm of representations. The point is that neither should once again take the place of the territory.

VI. The Permanent Danger

The proposal developed in this essay does not escape the very danger it attempts to describe.

If every representation can cease to be recognised as representation, the same applies to the ideas presented here. An apt phrase can become a doctrine. A living metaphor can die. Even the warning “do not confuse the map with the territory” can end up becoming another map that someone takes to be definitive.

The problem, therefore, is not to replace one set of ideas with another, nor even to abandon thought. It is to never forget that every formulation is a representation.

This is perhaps the most difficult demand, because thought is inevitably metaphorical. The danger begins when we forget that it is.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to bring very different perspectives into dialogue, perspectives that, over the course of these pages, have ultimately converged on the same observation. They all point towards the same recognition, namely that we tend to forget the difference between what happens and the representations we construct in our relationship with it.

In the light of these perspectives, this essay proposes a possibility: if the Zen masters are right, one consequence of *satori* might be that this forgetting ceases to occur. Words, concepts and metaphors would not disappear; they would simply once again be experienced as representations. Here, “forgetting” does not mean ceasing to remember a distinction we once knew. It means that the distinction ceases to appear in experience, because the representations through which we organise what happens have become transparent and come to be experienced as though they belonged to what happens.

It is important to clarify that our representations do not prevent us from seeing reality. We continue to see it, but alongside it appear the representations that thought constructs. Confusion begins when we cease to distinguish between the two and come to experience those representations as part of reality itself. The first victim of that confusion is not reality, but our ability to see it as clearly distinct from our representations. The map then takes the place of the territory, the finger replaces the moon, and representation ends up concealing that which, at first, it merely intended to point towards.

Precisely for this reason, this essay itself must remain only a map. The day someone were to confuse it with the territory, the very forgetting that these pages have attempted to describe would have occurred.