

Why We Must Accept the Existence of the Gray Zone Propositions For a TD Chair

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Abstract: *The gray zone is that which eludes common knowledge and all forms of expression. It can only be explored personally, outside the certainties that impose themselves on us unintentionally. This exploration is a manifestation of our inner freedom. It leads to the discovery of misidentified realities that lie outside what we thought we knew. The existence of this grey zone also constitutes a space, an in-between, which enables two people to exchange ideas and, through disputatio, to discover and qualify new realities, whether in the scientific, artistic or spiritual field. From a transdisciplinary perspective, this is how we move to another level of reality, beyond the initial contradictions that set one person's view against the other's view. The certainties of one and the other fade in the face of the discovery of realities that escape the clear-cut categories of what is true and what is false in our own opinion. Being reveals itself as both true and false, depending on how we understand it. This approach is based on the principles of phenomenology¹ and transdisciplinary analysis², and it seeks to overcome the causes of conflict and violence between human beings and between human communities.*

Keywords: *grey zone, in-between, uncertainty, disputatio, levels of reality.*

¹ Heidegger, Martin, *Acheminement vers la parole*, tr. fr. Gallimard, col. Tel, 1981, p. 75.

² Nicolescu, Bassarab, *Qu'est-ce que la réalité*, Liber, 2018, p. 34.

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1. Introduction



Figure one represent a personal photo.

I'm looking at the disc bi, originally from northeast China, which is dated to the Liangzhu period (3400-2200 B.C.) according to the certificate of authenticity given to me by the Hong Kong antique dealer when I bought it when Victoria Island was still a British colony.

We don't know what it was used for, most likely ritual purposes. Nor do I know what color it is. It's jade (not to be confused with jadeite). But what color is this jade? Is it green? No, it's not green. Creamy? No, it's not cream. What color is it? Bluish? Reddish (at least in places)? The more I observe it, the more I vary the light, the more I'm unable to answer this simple question: what is the color of the object before my eyes?

I just don't have the word for it. Which confirms that the object pre-exists in the qualifiers I give it. My disc bi refuses to be confined by the categories I have to describe it. And if I were to claim to qualify it by drawing on the stock of qualifiers at my disposal, I'd be saying something that wouldn't correspond to its reality. So, it's best to keep quiet.

But then a friend comes along, observing it from my side, and says, in a definitive tone: 'It's yellow.' I reply, because I have to, 'No, it's more like green.' We're in danger of clashing because we both feel we're not seeing the same thing. But that's a mistake. We're looking at the same thing, but we're not de-

scribing it in the same way. We use different words for it, stemming from different personal experiences of life. Maybe I said 'It's green,' because I read somewhere that jade is green. Perhaps yellow came to mind when he remembered a yellow vase (or so it seemed to him at the time).

This leaves us with two options. The first is for each of us to stick to our own position, out of principle ('It's mine, so I'm bound to say it better than you'), out of a desire to be 'right', out of an inability to distinguish between what we are and what we see, and what we see in terms of how we formulate it, i.e. how we fit it into a formula. We may even end up fighting. Or (this is the second possibility), we can discuss it, i.e. enter into a dialogue to better understand why we are both, perhaps unwittingly, expressing different qualifiers, and perhaps even agree, on the basis of this, on a happier formulation that would suit us both: 'it's a wet sand color, don't you think?' And conclude by saying that this is obvious.

Here's an observation: Mariana Thieriot's 'gray zone' is far from being a dull surface. In fact, it's made up of a complicated, blurred interweaving of multiple hues, some of them very vivid, which result in something we don't know how to name because we don't have the words to say it, perhaps also because we don't have the visual acuity to perceive it, and perhaps finally because we haven't had the opportunity to take an interest in it, unlike others perhaps.

So here we have the problem of the grey zone, and it arises in certain much more serious circumstances in our dealings with others, and with our interlocutors themselves. We find it hard to admit that we sometimes find ourselves, without even meaning to, in the middle of a grey zone, a zone where nothing can be exactly and definitely qualified. And so, this calls for closer examination.

2. What is the gray zone?

The existence of the grey zone is based on this presupposition: the world, in its very being, is greater than the vision we have of it and the interpretation we give to it stays within the limits of our language and our *doxa*. But this hermeneutic is not self-evident. Geometry, as invented by the Greeks, established the logical rules between points, lines and circles, and then postulated that the world could be reduced to a set of points, lines and circles. Firstly, this implicitly admits that our capacity for understanding may be greater than the object to which it applies. Secondly, that our understanding would thus precede the existent to which it applies. This is the principle that leads from Plato to Hegel, from the Cave to the Idea, and forms the basis of our faith in technoscience, i.e. in the human capacity to change the world to suit ourselves.

This idealist and scientific epistemology is the one that governs the Western epic in its claim to change the world, or rather, to change life – with the consequences we know. It is to such *hubris* that the idea of the 'grey zone' is opposed. The grey zone is that which lies beneath the understanding, even before

it questions the *dasein*. Here we find the confused magma of all that lies beyond – or below – human understanding, whether it's that which pre-existed it ('nature') or the unintended consequences of its action on the world as its earthly home. This is the unknown, the unnamed, opening up to exploration like a virgin forest.

This forest eludes all certainty. It exceeds, once again, our understanding, be it our knowledge, our logic or the vocabulary in which we express ourselves. Exploring it requires a personal commitment: we must leave the clearing of our certainties and embark on the perilous path of what escapes us. But we cannot wander alone without running the risk of insignificance or madness. The gray zone needs to be discovered through encounters with the Other, with the Other in his otherness, with the Other from a village other than the one we come from. It is then, beyond the certainties of the one and the certainties of the other, that a new land emerges, a new space carved out of the forest, which goes beyond the primitive clearings of the one and of the other. And so, the existence of the clearing that gradually takes shape is the very thing that allows us to form a society, beyond the prejudices that lock us both into our own certainties and those of our village.

But that's not all. If we accept that 'man is social by nature', as Aristotle asserts, then we can assert that it is the existence of the grey zone and its exploration, not in solitude but through dialogue, and debate, and action, that makes man exist in his *ipseity* beyond his identity as an individual in the mass of inhabitants of the village from which he comes. But recognizing the existence of the grey zone is not self-evident: it requires us to acknowledge man's finitude in this immensity in which he finds himself thrown. In his contemporary effort to imprint his will in the world, man denies the existence of the grey zone. He locks himself into what he takes for granted, contenting himself in his actions with going further along the path that was already mapped out, 'obvious' to all those around him, to the exclusion of what is not self-evident and would force him to deviate from the village's accepted certainties.

It's not certain that he's aware of this. The *I* and the *self* are not identical³. The *self* escapes the *I*. The effects of intentional action come up against unintentional action⁴, which often ruins the expected results. These unintentional actions, which the highways of Western *doxa* have imposed on the world, are all too visible in the immensity of their results and the damage they have caused. That's why exploring the grey zone, starting from the different villages into which humanity, past and present, is distributed, is today a vital necessity if we are to establish what 'the secret of the dawn'⁵ will be.

³ Ricoeur, Paul, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Le Seuil, col. Points, 1990, p. 46.

⁴ Landier, Hubert et Thieriot, Mariana, *Dans la forêt profonde*, *Plastir* 66, 09/2022.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

3. Why We Need the Grey Zone

Man's humanity manifests itself less in the closed basin of the harbor where the boats gather than in the uncertainty of the high sea where his curiosity and love of life take him. The harbor locks us into certainties that are meant to be definitive, and that we can only deepen by avoiding any sideways glance that might compromise them. The world is restricted to a shared *doxa*. Its components are well known: the existence of an arrow of history, technical and economic progress leading to prosperity and happiness, an implicitly or explicitly dualistic ontology, the superior power of humanity such that it can impose itself on the whole of reality. There are others. These presuppositions seem self-evident. To claim to depart from them is to run the risk of being either misunderstood, regarded as a deviant or considered a madman. And yet, this is where the grey zone lies.

We need this gray zone to avoid being locked into certainty. It represents the field of human freedom and creativity. It's what allows us to move forward in our humanity. At the same time, it enables us to avoid the confrontation of one village with another. Rigid certainties that cannot be abandoned, for those who rest in them, are opposed by the plasticity that enables us to move from one statement to another, which will then seem more accurate, through the exchange of ideas, without ceasing to be ourselves. The grey zone invites us to avoid confrontation between apparently opposing points of view, in order to reach a higher point of view together, integrating the initial points of view of both sides. It is the condition of humanity's existence as humanity.

But that's not all. The grey zone is the in-between that goes from me to you, from 'I' to 'you'⁶. Human beings, however, are reluctant to leave the familiar circle of certainties that animate them. Sinking into the grey zone represents a risk for the traveler: won't it be necessary, at some point in his quest, to abandon some of the beliefs on which he has based his self-confidence? Doesn't he run the risk of unexpected encounters with other travelers of the mind, driven by different certainties? If so, won't it be necessary, as in a forest encounter with a wild beast, to circle around it, sniff it out, learn to get closer to it, engage in what is called a dialogue? Or should we hunt it down like a malevolent beast with whom we can't come to terms on anything?

Such is the challenge of recognizing the grey zone and wandering within it. Hence everything that will dissuade human beings from taking the risk of going there:

1. And first of all, the refusal to venture beyond the comfortable ideological certainties that, consciously or unconsciously, drive us, and which we believe to be constitutive of a truth⁷ that would be definitive and on which our

⁶ Buber, Martin, *Je et Tu*, tr. fr. avec une préface de Gaston Bachelard, Aubier, 1969, p. 54.

⁷ Barreau, Sébastien, *De la vérité dans les sciences*, Dunod, 2019, p. 87.

identity is founded. I'd rather die than give it up! So how can we regard anyone who opposes these ideas, even if only by formulating different ones, as anything other than an enemy to be destroyed?

2. Then there's the *hubris* that drives us unconsciously, in the face of the other, against whom we must measure ourselves according to the principle that 'I impose myself; therefore I am'; using the canon that '*ultima ratio regis*', camouflaging its sound with excellent reasons: propagating True, defending Civilization, destroying the Axis of Evil, doing good for the other, even if he doesn't yet realize it.

3. This amounts to reducing the other to an object, denying his otherness as a human being. If we don't listen to them, it's because we're superior to them, and this in the name of the ultimate truth to which we refer, and which therefore demands to be imposed on them. How can we speak as equals with 'savages'? It's worth noting here that the white man of Western culture is not, and has never been over the last three centuries, stingy with this feeling of superiority by which he has justified his conquests and colonialism, as made possible by a technological superiority supposed to extend to all fields of culture, thought and man's relationship to the world⁸. And it's a grey area that needs to be rediscovered all over the planet.

4. And finally, the quantitative logic that drives technoscience and has come to permeate our vision of the world. What counts is the 'value' produced by the siting of the wind turbine, not the destruction of the harmony of the landscape it disfigures with its massive, disorienting presence. What counts is the pipeline cut through the bush, not the damage caused to the 'primitive' human communities whose sacred land they will have to leave behind. A quantitative logic that finds its latest avatar in the binary logic on which the digital tool is based. And yet, so-called 'artificial intelligence' refuses to accept any grey area between 'yes' and 'no', between '0' and '1'.

And so, there's no longer any room for debate. In the traditional market, I could discuss the price of the object I wanted to buy. And we would agree, the seller and I, after a long palaver, which brought us into society. That's no longer possible: the price is fixed, it wasn't set by the cashier and, since I buy on the Internet, I can't even see his or her face. The automatism of the global machine thus reduces the human being, as Günther Anders so aptly put it, to a mere anonymous functionary, devoid of 'self' and emotion. He finds himself in the position of that rail convoy organizer in 1940s Germany, whose name was Adolph Eichmann. Hence the choice for 'modern man'⁹ to accept or not to accept. To accept is to shut oneself away in the cosy circle of one's certainties; to refuse is to accept the personal risk of sinking into the grey zone.

⁸ Habermas, Jürgen, *De l'éthique de la discussion*, tr. fr., Flammarion, col. Champs essais, 2013. p. 40 et seq.

⁹ Heisenberg, Werner, *Le manuscrit de 1942*, tr. fr., Editions Allia, 2003, p. 53.

4. The Gray Zone and Transdisciplinarity

The transdisciplinary approach is the name we'll give to the transgression, from the initial certainties that inhabit us, towards the confused and uncertain zone where the chaos of *dasein* and the encounter with the other in his otherness mingle. This chaos, however, is not left to chance; it constitutes a **complex reality**, where loops cross and recross, only some of which appear to our understanding. This is the first aspect of transdisciplinarity: the world is not linear, it is multi-causal; it does not obey the laws we have invented to understand it; determinism is lost in the indefinite to the infinite. At every moment, we must accept to be surprised by the unexpected and the ineffable, by what has not yet been said and, sometimes, cannot be said.

When two travelers meet in the gray zone, they have two options. One is the confrontation, violent or otherwise. The other is to find, together, what makes sense to each other. This means admitting that reality is both black and white, that there are many shades of grey, and that no one can claim to be the holder of the truth in the face of error¹⁰. If I say I'm right no matter what you say, and that whatever you say is meaningless nonsense to me, it's because I refuse your ability to say anything other than what I expect you to say. I refuse your gaze whenever it differs from mine, I refuse your otherness. And so, we must first admit the existence and validity of this otherness if, on the basis of our respective statements, we are to hope to reach a common statement. This is the **principle of the included third party**: accepting that which escapes the logic with which we are familiar; admitting that truth can be expressed somewhere other than within the closed framework of our respective ease of understanding.

Six plus six can make twelve for one and ten for the other, depending on whether they use a decimal or duodecimal system. Ten is not twelve, and yet it's the same thing beyond the different instruments we use to count. Acknowledging the diversity of our instruments allows us to rise to another **level of reality**. Level of reality or level of understanding the reality? Wrong question: the observing subject is not external to the reality he observes. And so, the being that I am and the being that you are well together have accessed another level of that being that encompasses both of us. And because what you say is different from what 'I' say, you give me access to 'myself'¹¹, i.e. to my quality of *homo sapiens sapiens*. And so, the existence of the grey zone, where I can meet you, and with you access another level of reality, is the very condition of our common humanity.

5. Back to Disc Bi. Instead of conclusions

I don't know anything about my disc bi. I don't know how old it is, I

¹⁰ Lao Tsu, in *Philosophes taoïstes*, traduction par Liou Kia-hway, Gallimard, col. Pleiade, 1967, p. 67; Yamauchi, Tokuryû, *Logos et lemme*, traduction du japonais par Augustin Berque, CNRS Editions, 2020, p. 74.

¹¹ Ricoeur, Paul, *op. cit.*, 1990, p. 46.

don't know what it's used for, and I can't say what color it is. It's an enigmatic thing. At least I can say what it inspires in me. It's probably a symbol. It can't be a symbol of the world turning around its axis; otherwise, the disc would be circular – but it's not. In addition, there are two holes at the top of the disc, which would have allowed it to be suspended from a cord. This suggests that it was used to distinguish two spaces: the front and the back. From then on, everything becomes clearer: in front, it's our world, the world of humans; behind, it's another world: that of gods or spirits; whatever name is given to them, they are realities that were there before humans were there to see and name them.

And so, the disc *bi* is a frontier extended between two worlds. But a frontier is a wall that encloses us if it is not pierced by a point of passage. Through this point of passage, this roughly circular opening in the center of the disc *bi*, we can take you to the invisible, to the other world, to what's already there, behind. And then, almost invisibly, engraved towards the bottom of the disc, a small figure comes to invite us in: it looks like the two eyes of an owl. They're there to help us fly into the grey zone.

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