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A Phenomenological Approach to the Korean ‘We’: A Study in Social Intentionality

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Abstract This paper explores the phenomenological concept ‘we’ based on a pre-existing understanding of traditional phenomenology alongside a new aspect of the concept by introducing an analysis of ‘we’ in Korean. The central questions of this paper are whether the ‘we’ can be understood as more than a collection of individuals, whether the ‘we’ can precede both ‘I’ and ‘thou,’ and whether the ‘we’ as an extension of the ‘I’ or an extended self should necessarily mean the plural of the ‘I.’

Keywords Intersubjectivity, Subjectivity, the ‘We,’ Phenomenology, Korean Language

The Problem of the ‘We’

As one of the most crucial concepts for the study of social intentionality as well as time-consciousness, ‘we’ is a much-discussed theme in phenomenology nowadays, yet the concept remains less than fully

explored. From Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, to Fichte's *Ich=Ich*, Husserl's *Selbstbewußtsein*, and Heidegger's *Dasein*, the focus of Western philosophy has traditionally been focused on the 'I' as subject, considered to be the basis of our understanding of self and the world. To a large extent, discourses on the 'we' have stayed caught in the system where this 'I' is taken as the core of an autonomous individual.

In this framework, the 'we' is taken as the plural form of the 'I.' In other words, this 'we' is 'I' with (or for) other 'I's, in which all 'I's constitute the basis and starting point of a collective subjectivity. Typically, when the 'we' has been an object of study, it was analyzed from within a perspective of an I-Thou relation in which the 'you' and the 'I' were the necessary conditions for each other's ontological status as different subjects, and together they formed an intersubjective we-ness. The 'we' is therefore the plural of individual and subjective 'I's: 'I' + 'I' (you).

However, this definition is not sufficient for a full understanding of the 'we' next to the 'other,' because this entails another core problem in the philosophical work based on the system of 'I'-subjectivity: how can the 'other' exist as other subjects, what is the relation between my perception of the 'other' and their existence, and how can this self-dependent 'I' reach out to the other? These issues have ceaselessly raged around the relation of the individual subject and intersubjectivity, and because of this, many philosophers in the Western tradition, not just those mentioned above, have been accused of solipsism.

Any discussion of the ‘we’ cannot escape this problem as long as it is conceived of as an intersubjective concept made up of the combination of the ‘I’s of the self and the other (‘you’). When either ‘you’ stands as the precondition of the ‘I’ or the ‘I’ as the precondition of the ‘you,’ ‘I’ or ‘you’ have to come first for the ‘we’ to be there. In this system, the ‘you’ is the other ‘I’s but not the third other: ‘we’ (I+you) ↔ the other.

The central questions raised in the analysis of the ‘we’ concern (1) whether there is another possibility for understanding the ‘we’ in a manner other than as a collection of individual ‘I’s, (2) whether the ‘we’ can precede ‘I’ and ‘you,’ and whether the ‘I’ and ‘you’ can be extracted from the ‘we,’ (3) so that the third ‘other’ can have a place in the ‘we.’ When the ‘we’ can be proven to be more than ‘I’ + other ‘I’(s), there would also be another possibility for understanding the ‘other’ from a new perspective. Based on this different perspective on the self and the ‘other’ uncloaked in the form of the ‘we,’ an empathetic understanding between the self and the ‘other’ could be re-examined with a new point of view.

‘We’ in Traditional Western Theories

1. ‘We’ as Plural of the ‘I’

In Western philosophy, the necessary condition for intersubjectivity is a plurality of subjectivities based upon the concept of the ‘we.’ The German concept *Intersubjektivität* seems to have first appeared in the works of Johannes Volkelt in 1885, and it was first used in English in 1896 to describe a thing that has validity for all persons independently

of every subject (Zahavi 2014, 97). Husserl uses the term to designate a plurality of subjects and the relation that exists between them (Husserl 1973a-c). In his phenomenology, intersubjectivity is the necessary condition for the constitution of subjectivity as an ego (Husserl 1954, 175). He asserted that “the other is the first human being, not I” (Husserl 1973b, 418) and that “self-consciousness and consciousness of others are inseparable” (Husserl 1954, 256). However, this self-consciousness is an ego, which, as an ‘I,’ necessarily has its ‘thou,’ its ‘we,’ and its ‘you,’ where this ‘I’ has its place among the rest of all other personal pronouns (Husserl 1954, 270). In other words, if there were no ‘you,’ there would also be no ‘I’ in contrast to it; that is, the ‘I’ is only constituted as ‘I’ in contrast to the ‘you’ (Husserl 1973a, 6, 247). In this context, the ‘we’ is a fundamental part of the existence of ‘I.’ This formulation, though, confirms only that the ‘we’ is a part of ‘I.’ The ‘we’ itself is not a self, but is constituted through the ‘I,’ a pure ego with absolute individuation (Husserl 1952, 299-300).

The pure ego is another name for the subject of experience (Husserl 1952, 97), and lived experiences in the flux of consciousness have an essence that is absolutely their own; they bear their individuation in themselves (Husserl 1952, 299-300). In this system, Husserl came up with the concept of ‘pairing’ to include the other in this resolutely individual experience. ‘Pairing’ is an “associatively constitutive component of my experience of someone else” (Husserl 1969, 112). However, this concept cannot yet guarantee the being of the other, because “this other is a reflection of my self and yet not the original

reflection; an analogon of my self, yet not the analogon in the ordinary sense” (Husserl 1950, 125; see also Kojima 2000, 107).

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines the ‘we’ as subject, which is identical to the plural of the ‘I’ (Sartre 1992, 535): “In the we, nobody is the object. The we includes a plurality of subjectivities which recognize one another as subjectivities” (Sartre 1992, 535). Sartre clarifies that his understanding of the we relies on Heidegger’s understanding of *Mitsein*, which appears in *Being and Time* with the meaning of ‘To-be-with.’ He explains that “the very existence and use of this grammatical form [‘we’] necessarily refers us to a real experience of the *Mitsein*” (Sartre 1992, 535). This grammatical form of plural ‘I’ as subject uncloaks the “fundamental and transcending connection with the other” (Sartre 1992, 315).

Sartre, however, argues that the ‘with’ in this Heideggerian construction of ‘To-be-with’ needs to be interpreted from a new perspective, which yields an altogether different meaning to this concept: “‘with’ does not infer the reciprocal relation of recognition and of conflict which would result from the appearance of a human-reality other than mine in the midst of the world” (Sartre 1992, 336). In this world, ‘I’ is not alone. The temporality of Dasein as ‘Being-in-the-world’ is not co-constructed with the other’s time. Dasein has been there already with history, but the construction of the *ekstases* of Dasein’s temporality does not include its experience with the other in the world. As Sartre points out, “Human-reality at the very heart of this *ekstases* remains alone” (Sartre 1992, 336). ‘I’ exists, though, related to other ‘I’s

in the world. This relationship to other ‘I’s is essential to my existence. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre insists: “The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own and that cannot think or will without doing so for or against me. We are thus immediately thrust into a world that we may call ‘intersubjectivity.’ It is in this world that man decides what he is and what others are” (Sartre 2007, 41-42).

According to Sartre’s explication, the concept of ‘we’ is not an expression of ‘my’ recognition of the other, nor simply a grammatical form of the sum of ‘I’s. However, the ‘I’ is still in the center of this *Mitsein* as the subject which connects to the other ‘I’s, and the preceding distinction between ‘I’ and the other is a necessary condition in this ‘we’ structure. This still conforms to, therefore, the form of “from ‘I’ to the ‘we,’” and not the other way around. The discourse is firmly bound within the range of the reflection of ‘I,’ as David Carr articulates in “Cogitamus Ergo Sumus” with a doubt about ‘the idea of social subject’ in traditional philosophy: “Other individuals are analogues of myself; but the idea of a social subject seems at best a *façon de parler*, at worst pure myth or construction” (Carr 1986, 524).

2. ‘We’ as Extended Self: Nosism

Carr argued that the ‘we,’ as an expression of identification with and membership in a group (Carr 1986, 524f), is simply an exchange of the singular form of the first person to the plural form. However, the Korean

‘we’ as an extended self is not simply the plural of ‘I’s. It is rather closer to the concept of *Gemeingefühl* (Elberfeld 2015, 204f), which enables an individual to have his or her own self-consciousness as an extended self. Carr focuses more on the social aspect of the we-ness related to proactive social engagement and identification. He defines ‘we’ as a group of collective subjects, as distinguished from an objective group membership such as family, class, nation, ethnicity, etc., which are each formed without identification or participation in the group, while in Korean, ‘we’ is often used exactly within these groups such as ‘our country’ and ‘our family.’

In this piece, however, discourse on ‘our country’ or ‘our people’ will be intentionally excluded to prevent the discussion from extending into the political-historical range, because the form of ‘our country’ or ‘our people’ is often associated with the history of the formation of the modern national identity of the Korean nation-state, which leads the discussion to an unavoidable connection with nationalism. This is remains outside of the scope of the present discussion.

In Western languages, there are some similar phenomena where the ‘we’ acts as an ‘extended self,’ such as *pluralis excellentiae*, which refers to plural words that take singular forms, and *pluralis majestatis*, which refers to the phenomenon in which a single person holding a high office, such as a sovereign or religious leader, refers to herself as ‘we,’ also known as the ‘royal we.’

Pluralis majestatis is a representative example of *nosism*, which refers to the phenomenon of using ‘we’ instead of the first person

singular to refer to oneself when expressing one's personal opinions. Another example is the editorial 'we,' which is used by editorial columnists in newspapers or in other media when they, as an individual, refer to themselves as 'we,' thereby casting themselves in the role of a spokesperson. The author's 'we,' or *pluralis modestiae*, is a similar case and is the practice common in mathematical or scientific literature of referring to a generic third person as 'we.'¹

These forms of 'we' can all be substituted with the 'you.'² This you functions similarly to the 'we' not only in scientific literature, but also in spoken language, in such sentences as "you have to eat more vegetables," where 'you' is used to refer not necessarily to the addressee as the specific 'you,' but rather 'we' in the general sense. The 'you' in the following quote, "When you sit with a nice girl for two hours you think it's only a minute, but when you sit on a hot stove for a minute you think it's two hours. That's relativity," can be replaced with 'we' without a change of meaning. This 'you' is rather 'we,' although it is expressed in the second person singular form. 'We' in this sense refers to 'the reader and the author,' as the author assumes that the reader agrees with the ideas that the author is presenting. This is actually also a common practice in philosophical works where 'we' may be familiar, and it is also something that occurs in comments in computer code. This 'we,' however, cannot be substituted with the 'I,' because this nosistic 'we'

¹ An example of this occurs in the following quote: "we see that our extension of the principle of relativity implies the necessity of the law of the equality of inertial and gravitational mass." (Albert Einstein. 1920. *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, trans. Robert W. Lawson. London: Methuen & Co.)

² Or with 'one' or '*das Man*' in German.

refers to a generic group of people rather than expressing the ‘I’-ness of the subject. When you say “Our family came from Seoul” in Korean, however, this ‘we’ in the form of ‘our family’ only includes those who actually belong to this family group, and not, for example, the global family or all extended family members. In other words, it simply means “my family.”

At this point, let us go back to the basic question of the argument, whether the ‘we’ could be more than a collection of ‘I’s. Do the examples of nosism, *pluralis majestatis* and *pluralis modestiae* prove that the ‘we’ can be more than a collection of ‘I’s? The ‘we’ of *pluralis majestatis* and *pluralis modestiae* refer to one person who represents the ‘other.’ I suspect that this ‘we’ still has to be considered as a collection of selves. In *pluralis majestatis*, the ‘we’ implies God and the king, in the sense that God is the king and the king is God. This extended self is approved *after* the coronation, which means the notion of the ‘we’ as ‘the king = God’ is not pre-subjective. It is rather post-subjective. The self-identity of the King (A) as the ‘we’ is extended in the form of ‘the king (A) = God (B)’ or sometimes ‘the king (A) = the people (C),’ which means the collection of (A + B) or (A + C) is laid out in another subjective (A’).

The ‘we’ in *pluralis modestiae* also comes about in the process of transforming oneself into the ‘we,’ which assumes the agreement of the ‘other,’ in this case the reader. Therefore, this ‘we’ is also formed through the act of collecting together multiple individuals, which in this case means the presumption of mutual agreement.

In the usage of the ‘we’ in Korean, on the other hand, when one says ‘our home’ referring to one’s own home which is not shared with anyone else, this ‘we’ (A) is not a result of (A + B), but (A) itself is used to refer to an extended self, not to a self who is not recognized as a single person with the ‘other.’ This extension of ‘I’ is not derived from a collection of individuals, but it *is there* first, and then it creates room for the ‘other’ to come in. In other words, the ‘we’ in ‘our home’ can also be ‘myself’ and the ‘other’ if the ‘other’ joins the ‘we.’ However, as explained above, the collection of ‘I’ and the ‘other’ as other ‘I’s is not a condition nor a prerequisite in Korean of this ‘we’ of ‘our home.’

3. ‘I-Thou’ Relationship

According to Husserl, self-consciousness and the consciousness of others are inseparable (Husserl 1954, 256). Husserl consequently holds that the personal ‘I’ has its origin in social life (Husserl 1973b, 175). “Personality is constituted only as the subject enters into social relations with others” (Husserl 1973b, 175). He understood ‘I’ in a relative relation to the other, namely, the ‘thou’ and the ‘we,’ in which the ego as a person “requires relation to a world which engages it. Therefore, ‘I,’ we and the world belong together” (Husserl 1952, 288). He ascribes a relative mode of being to the personal ‘I’ (Husserl 1952, 319).

As mentioned above, the concepts ‘I’ and ‘we’ are relative in this context: ‘I’ requires ‘thou,’ ‘we,’ and the ‘other’ (Husserl 1952, 288). Martin Buber develops this idea of ‘we’ and subjectivity in his ‘I-Thou’ model (Buber 1995), which agrees with Hiroshi Kojima’s criticism that not only the ‘other’ of the ‘I-She/He/It’ structure, which Buber

differentiates from ‘I-Thou,’ but also the ‘thou’ in ‘I-Thou’ is taken as a passive object (Kojima 2000, 107). Of course, the other person(s) can proactively affect one and interact with one, while mere things are only there to be received as an object of one’s perception. However, what does this ‘proactively affecting’ mean between two different individuals? Can one understand and be affected by the ‘other’ without perceiving the ‘other’ through the projection of herself?

This question leads us to another massive point of debate related to the authoritarian perspective of empathy elucidated by Lévinas. “Putting yourself in another’s shoes” can be interpreted with the implication that all empathetic activity is possible only from ‘my’ side. It can also be argued that things can also affect one through projection. For example, seeing a photo of one’s grandfather who has passed away can make one feel sad. How exactly does this work differently from seeing a person who cries, which causes one to feel sad as well? How about seeing a character in a film who affects one’s feelings? Is that person in the film an object or not?

This is still a highly controversial debate that comes with a long history as to whether the ‘other’ can be perceived as another subject or ego at all. Kojima’s criticism that the ‘thou’ in the ‘I-Thou’ is not distinguished from an object from the perspective of ‘I’ could be understood in this framework, but I personally would not yet go so far as to expound upon this subject-object debate in this paper.

The phenomenon of *pluralis majestatis* provides a clue to understand the ‘I-Thou’ model of the ‘we.’ The ‘royal we’ refers to the king who

acts conjointly with the authority of the deity, as in the form of ‘God and I,’ which is the fundamental base of the ‘I-Thou’ model for Buber. His *Ich und Du* begins with the theoretical foundation of his ‘I-Thou’ model: “*Wer Du sprichst, hat kein Etwas, hat nichts. Aber er steht in der Beziehung*” (Buber 1995, 5). All of my experiences start and are based on this relationship [*Beziehung*], which is possible only through my relationship with ‘thou’ [*Du*], not with ‘it’ [*Es*].

The absolute relationship is the relationship between God and ‘I,’ in which God stands as the absolute ‘thou’ (Buber 1995, 75). Only the entire world stands in this absolute ‘I-Thou’ relationship with God. In the ‘I-It’ relationship, where the world stands ‘here’ and God stands ‘there’ or where God is in the world, ‘I’ as individuality separates one(self) from the world (see Buber 1995, 75).

By developing the system of ‘I-She/He’ relationship as differentiated from an ‘I-It’ relationship, Kojima attempts to overcome Buber’s theological restraint, which is based on the ‘absolute relationship’ with the Absolute as ‘thou,’ in which all of the third parties are suppressed as ‘non-thou.’ He argues that the calling of the other as ‘thou’ is a precondition for the possibility of a genuine encounter (Kojima 2000, 194). This other ‘thou’ referred to by Kojima includes not only ‘she’ and ‘he’ as other human beings, but also non-human beings, granting a Japanese Buddhist touch to this theological conception of the Judeo-Islamic-Christian tradition.

Intersubjectivity relies on individual subjectivity, and the subject raises the issue of isolation of ‘I’ from the rest of the world. Husserl

writes: “The pure Ego of any given cogitation already has absolute individuation, and the cogitation itself is something absolutely individual in itself...the lived experiences in the flux of consciousness have an essence that is absolutely their own; they bear their individuation in themselves” (Husserl 1952, 299-300). The preceding (individual) ‘I’ forms the center in all the cases of I-Thou/She/He/It by Husserl, Buber and Kojima.

Even if Kojima adopted certain elements of Japanese thinking and even if he attributed animality to other individual subjects in an attempt to (re)connect the ‘I’ to the world, he omits the fact that the concept of individuality is a concept artificially formulated and translated from Western literature to Chinese and Japanese (see Yanabu 2001, 193-205), as well as Korean. The concept of individuality, however, is a necessary condition for the ‘we’ in traditional phenomenology, for the individuality of each subject is the basis of intersubjectivity, and intersubjectivity is the ground form of the ‘we.’ As long as the ‘we’ is the combination of ‘I’ and ‘the other,’ and ‘the other’ as either ‘you,’ ‘she,’ ‘he,’ or ‘it,’ this ‘we’ is conceptualized within the framework of the individual (and perhaps isolated) subject. Even though Husserlian thinkers, including Husserl himself, insist on the subjectivity of the ‘you’ in ‘I-Thou’ as ‘subject-subject,’ the ‘I’ still requires the objective counterpart to be formulated as ‘I.’

‘We’ in Korean

1. Possessive Form of the ‘We’

In Korean, however, it seems that there is not necessarily a presupposed 'I' at the center of the 'we.' In other words, the 'we' does not come from 'I,' but rather 'I' comes from the 'we.' 'I' is a superfluous expression in Korean, while the 'we' is the most common and natural way of addressing the self both in spoken and written language. This 'we' is a single unit as a whole, not as 'I' plus 'I.' There also exists a plural form of the 'we,' i.e. 'we's' in Korean. One of the most significant Korean 'we' expressions is revealed in the possessive form as 'our wife' or 'our husband' spoken to someone who does not belong together with this 'wife' or 'husband.'

As Carr points out, 'we' must indicate 'my' affiliated relation to someone who is a participant in the conversation (Carr 1986, 524f). But in Korean, the addressee does not have to be a member of the group for the speaker to be able to say 'we.' The husband of 'our husband' in Korean is regarded neither as 'he' nor 'you' in contrast to 'I,' because 'our *someone*' as *a whole* is a subject of community rather than a combined form of individual subjects. The members of this 'our group' are not required to identify with nor participate in the group in order to be in this 'we.'

One could argue that it depends on the situation, and that the 'we' is also said in English among un-related people. For example, two sisters could say (a) "we all like dogs" to a visitor, referring to their dog as (b) "our dog," as if they included the visitor in this 'our.' In the case of (a), this 'we' is one typical case of the nosistic 'we' as explained above. The 'we' of (b) "our dog" does not necessarily include the visitor in the

domain of this particular ‘we.’ It is still ‘our’ dog, that is their, i.e. the two sisters’, dog. Even if they mean the ‘we’ including the visitor in this case, the visitor still cannot say “our dog” to the sisters referring to the sisters’ dog, because it is not his dog. Meanwhile, in Korean, the visitor can refer to this dog as “our dog,” and it does not sound strange or wrong in any sense. Rather, it is a natural and friendly way of addressing the dog, even if the visitor does not exercise ownership over it. The visitor would more than likely say “our dog,” especially if she is a dog-lover.

Here are some more examples that I would like to examine in detail:

For instance, ‘I’ can say in Korean to ‘my’ father:

(1) “Our husband (our Stephen) brought home these flowers.”

‘I’ can also say to another person (S) who is not a member of our family:

(2) “I told our father that our Stephen brought home these flowers.”

The person (S) who heard this can reply:

(3) “Our Stephen is thoughtful.”

In (1), ‘you’ is my father (the addressee) and ‘I’ is ‘I’ in an ‘I-Thou’ relationship, but Stephen, the third person, also belongs to the ‘we’ in this case, but neither as ‘you’ nor as ‘he.’ These three people are treated as one ‘we,’ existing as one extended self. Instead of individuating people, the ‘we’ can be formulated into a plural form which itself reveals the plurality of people.

If ‘my’ father says “we all like flowers,” this means that ‘we’ all three like flowers. But this ‘we’ does not have to be divided into three different individuals to reveal the fact that there is more than one person. Nor

does there have to be first an ‘I,’ ‘you,’ or ‘he’ to *create* the ‘we,’ but the ‘we’ is there before this individuation.

In (2), our father is not shared with the addressee (S), but the addressee (S) still belongs together in this ‘we’ group of ‘our father.’ In (3) also, the addresser (S) does not have any personal relationship with Stephen, but this addresser (S) again belongs to this ‘we.’ This belonging together presupposes the preceding co-being or co-existence of the world. In all the cases of (1), (2), and (3), ‘I’ as an individual self is not required, and Stephen, the father, and the third person (S) are not reduced to ‘he’ or ‘she’ in contrast to ‘I.’

In Korean, there is another expression for parties excluded from the ‘we.’ To point at a person, you can say ‘this person’ or ‘that person’ as in Germanic languages, but there is a third demonstrative pronoun in Korean which is *kũ*.³ This is hard to translate into Germanic languages because there is no matching term for this concept. This particular demonstrative pronoun refers to someone or something that does not belong to the ‘we.’ In this sense, the ‘we’ itself as a whole can be opposed to the one who does not belong to it, which is not ‘you,’ nor ‘he/she,’ nor ‘they,’ nor ‘this,’ nor ‘that.’

This reveals another whole dimension of the ‘we.’ Only this ‘not-in-the-we-belonging’ person can be taken as an object in contrast to the all, who belong to the preceding ‘we.’ The ‘we’ or “our we’s” stand in contrast to someone who is not this person, nor that person, nor ‘she/he/it,’ nor ‘they,’ but to someone who does not belong to this ‘we’

³ This was Romanized from ‘ㄱ’ following the McCune-Reischauer format.

at all by existing in a separate time and space. This distance is, however, not only spatio-temporal, but also emotional and psychological, referring to someone I do not know (*wissen aber nicht kennen*). Even a stranger, however, at the same time, if she/he is present with me in the conversation, could belong to the ‘we,’ because by being there, that person is no longer another object in contrast to the ‘we.’

A stranger and ‘my’ father are not the same ‘he,’ but they can be included in the ‘we,’ in which ‘I,’ the addressee (my father or the stranger), and the third person, Stephen in this case, who is referred to in the conversation, belong together in the ‘we.’ This belonging together does not, however, necessarily entail a social or psychological bond between different individuals. In this ‘we,’ these three individuals’ memories are not necessarily shared, nor do their individual time-consciousnesses overlap to construct a common, shared timeline, but they nevertheless belong together.

2. Belongingness: Inclusive and Exclusive ‘We’

Related to this inclusiveness, ‘we’ can note that there is another level of separation of ‘we’ from the other, to which the notion of clusivity in linguistics refers. Clusivity indicates the grammatical distinction between the inclusive and the exclusive ‘we.’ The former ‘we’ means the ‘we’ as ‘you and I,’ while the latter ‘we’ means ‘they/he/she/it and I but not you’ excluding the addressee(s). This distinction is mundanely expressed in Korean. There are, in effect, two different forms of the ‘we’ in Korean which are *u-ri* and *chō-hi*.⁴ The first ‘we’ as *u-ri* functions as

⁴ These refer to ‘우리’ and ‘저희’ respectively.

the inclusive and exclusive ‘we,’ but *chǒ-hi* is almost always used as the exclusive ‘we.’ However, *u-ri* as the exclusive ‘we’ can be said only in cases when the addressee is of equal age or younger than the addresser, or the ages of the addresser and addressee are very close.

In fact, the answer for the question as to why “*chǒ-hi* is almost always used as the exclusive we” is still controversial however. One can say “*chǒ-hi* institute did everything from *chǒ-hi* side to prepare for the conference” to her boss who works at the same institute. Or a child can ask her grandmother, “did *chǒ-hi* family come from the north?” referring to ‘their’ family as *chǒ-hi* family. In both cases, the boss and grandmother also belong to this *chǒ-hi*. Indeed, *chǒ-hi* is used very frequently in similar contexts, but most of the time it is an honorific error. The right way to refer to their ‘shared’ institute or family is not *chǒ-hi* but *u-ri*.

What is significant about the patterns of using the exclusive ‘we’ in Korean is that the addresser uses the ‘we’ even if the addresser refers to herself in the first person singular. For example, in Korean ‘our home’ is a common expression, said in the form of ‘*u-ri/chǒ-hi* home’, which refers to ‘my home,’ with ‘my’ referring to the addresser. The addresser, of course, could have meant ‘our home’ which belongs not only to herself but to her other family members as well. But even when the addresser who says ‘*u-ri/chǒ-hi* home’ is a single person who lives alone, or in an extreme case, who never had a family in her entire life and who has always lived alone, who would still say ‘*u-ri/chǒ-hi* home’ when she wants to talk about her home to others. In this case, one can see the ‘we’

(our, us) is more commonly used in Korean than ‘I’ (my, me) to mean the actual ‘I’ (the first person singular).

Possessive expressions such as “*u-ri/chǒ-hi* home,” or “*u-ri/chǒ-hi* husband,” or “*u-ri/chǒ-hi* kids,” etc. do not presuppose or require the complete separation of ‘I’ from the ‘other’ who belongs to this group of ‘we,’ if there are others in this ‘we.’ When ‘*u-ri*’/‘*chǒ-hi*’ as the exclusive ‘we’ is used as a subject noun, however, for example “we [*u-ri/chǒ-hi*] eat sugary breakfast,” this ‘*u-ri*’/‘*chǒ-hi*’ includes the third party who eats the sugary breakfast together with the addresser. The addresser would not necessarily use ‘*u-ri*’/‘*chǒ-hi*’ instead of ‘I,’ if she always eats alone. But at the same time, the addresser would say “I eat sugary breakfast,” only when she wants to emphasize the ‘I’ in this sentence, in other words, to distinguish ‘my’ different taste or habit of breakfast from the addressee or the other. Beyond that, one would say that she eats sugary breakfast without a personal pronoun at all, for example: “[...] eat sugary breakfast,” without a subject noun, ‘I’ in this case.

The exclusive ‘we’ in Korean brings with it another whole package of cultural elements, one of which is the honorific as briefly mentioned above. The ‘*chǒ-hi*’ as the exclusive ‘we’ is used not necessarily to ‘exclude’ the addressee, but rather it is used to express respect for the addressee, as opposed to when ‘*u-ri*’ is used as the exclusive ‘we.’ More specifically, when the addresser talks to a person or a group of people who are older or placed higher in the relevant hierarchy system, or who the addresser simply does not know or is not close to, she uses ‘*chǒ-hi*’

to refer to herself and her group instead of ‘*u-ri*.’ The distance the addresser creates in her conversation room with the ‘other’ is an expression of respect in most cases rather than an instance of separating herself deliberately from the addressee. Of course, ‘*chǒ-hi*’ could also draw a clear line between the addressee and the addresser, when it is necessary to distinguish the ‘other’ from *me* or *us*. ‘*Chǒ-hi*’ sounds, however, not as aggressive and exclusive as the first person singular form ‘*my*.’

The distinction between the inclusive and exclusive forms is almost universally found among the Austronesian languages and the languages of northern Australia (see Cysouw, 2013). Also, there are some languages that have a pronoun expressing ‘we’ which is used for expressing ‘I.’ For example, in Qawasqar, “*cecaw qjeq’ja qjenaq afoxat*” could mean “I ran yesterday” or “we ran yesterday,” and there is no way to decide from this sentence alone if it means ‘I’ or ‘we’ who ran yesterday. This usage is rather uncommon, but there are languages with no specialized plural pronouns, as with Maricopa (see Cysouw, 2013). In Korean, there is a distinction between ‘I’ and ‘we,’ and they are used in different contexts unlike in Qawasqar. However, the ‘we’ representing oneself is a more commonly used expression, as mentioned above, while ‘I’ is used intentionally to refer to the ‘own-ness’ of the self in special occasions.

In the case of ‘*chǒ-hi*,’ which separates the addresser from the present addressee, however, the present co-being of the addresser with the addressee is not expressed in the form of the ‘we.’ As mentioned above,

the ‘*chǒ-hi*’ is close to the exclusive ‘we.’ This commonly used form of the exclusive ‘we,’ ‘*chǒ-hi*,’ reveals evidence for the possibility of the ‘we’ beyond the ‘I-Thou’ relationship, because in the ‘*chǒ-hi*,’ the third party who belongs to this ‘we’ but is not present in the moment is not excluded. When ‘I’ say that “*chǒ-hi* wife likes Korean food,” the wife who is not present at the conversation site still belongs to the ‘we’ (*chǒ-hi*) together with the addresser. In this ‘*chǒ-hi*,’ ‘I’ and my wife belong together in the ‘we,’ excluding the addressee who is ‘you’ from this conversation. This third person (wife) included in the ‘*chǒ-hi*’ is distinguished from the ‘*kǔ*’ person, who is not only not present in this moment but also does not belong to this ‘we’ group at all.

One interesting point is that native Korean speakers are commonly confused between ‘*chǒ-hi*’ and ‘*u-ri*.’ Not only children, but adults also quite often make the mistake of saying ‘*u-ri*’ in the situation where it is proper to say ‘*chǒ-hi*.’ However, this mistake is not grammatically wrong, but it is not proper because it does not sound polite. In other words, it is an honorific error, not a grammatical fault. Therefore, ‘*chǒ-hi*’ cannot be used as counterevidence that proves that the ‘we’ in Korean is technically the same as the first person singular ‘I.’ ‘*Chǒ-hi*’ is an honorific form of the ‘we’ which is used in place of the ‘*u-ri*.’ Strictly speaking, ‘*chǒ-hi*’ does not always come with the clear and determined intention of excluding a certain group or a person as in the case of the exclusive ‘we.’ For example, it is not intended to exclude the audience when it is said “*chǒ-hi* [our] husband is from this town.” The ‘*chǒ-hi*’ in this statement gives the information of the addressee, that this addressee

is older, or someone with a higher social status than the addresser, or not close to the addresser. ‘*Chǒ-hi*’ is a modest way of saying ‘we’ that does not necessarily intend to exclude the present addressee in this case.

‘*U-ri*’ and the ‘*chǒ-hi*’ can be compared to the two different forms of ‘I’ in Korean in terms of ‘*na*’ and ‘*chǒ*.’⁵ They both mean ‘I’ with no semantic difference other than the honorific distinction. The latter one is the honorific form of the former one. As in the case of ‘*chǒ-hi*’ and ‘*u-ri*,’ if one replaces ‘*chǒ*’ with ‘*na*,’ it is not grammatically wrong but could be seen as lacking courtesy within certain situations.

This ‘*chǒ-hi*,’ however, cannot replace ‘*u-ri*’ in the case of ‘our Stephen’ as in Sentence (3): “Our Stephen is thoughtful,” as spoken by a stranger who is not related to Stephen or Stephen’s family. The point that I would like to raise in this context is not that there are two different forms of ‘we’ in Korean in order to then show how they fit the analysis of the inclusive and the exclusive ‘we,’ but rather that there is a case such as ‘our Stephen’ spoken by a person who does not share any social identification or group membership with Stephen, in which the addresser, the addressee, and the third person, either related or unrelated, *are there* together as the ‘we.’

3. ‘We’ as Pre-Subjective

The possessive form of ‘our’ in Korean is not quite intersubjective. Rather, it is a pre-subjective ‘we’ and does not reflect the subjectivity of a personal pronoun, nor a subject-object structure. The individuality of a subject is unveiled in the personal pronouns as ‘I,’ ‘he,’ ‘she,’ and ‘it.’

⁵ These refer to ‘*나*’ and ‘*저*’ respectively.

Understanding the subject in terms of individuality is not a natural way of understanding a person in Korean, where a person is referred to by their personal name or the name of their relationship to the person who refers to them. For example, my father and a random man whom I ran into on the street can never be the same ‘he,’ even if both of them are a third-person, masculine singular.

In this community where all ‘he’s are not the same ‘he’s and ‘she’s not the same ‘she’s, the ‘we’ is not a collection of ‘I’ and any other ‘he’ or ‘she’ or ‘it.’ ‘I’ can say ‘our Stephen,’ who is ‘my’ husband, to anyone, including ‘our father’ or to a stranger. All of these people and Stephen, however, do not have to belong to or form a certain group together. ‘My’ husband is not shared when ‘I’ say ‘our husband.’ Neither ‘my’ father nor the stranger can say ‘our husband,’ but they can still say ‘our Stephen’ even if they are not related to Stephen in any possible way.

This ‘we’ in ‘our Stephen’ is a pre-subjective ‘we’ that is not based on the distinction and coalescence of ‘I’ the addresser, ‘you’ the addressee, and the third party, because this ‘*u-ri*’ [our] in ‘our Stephen’ does not mean that the addresser possesses Stephen. But by adding ‘*u-ri*’ [‘we’] in front of the person who is spoken about, the co-existence of the addresser, the addressee, and the third party is expressed as the pre-condition of the existence of each existent. Although this ‘we’ is expressed in a possessive form placed in front of a noun, the possessive form of the ‘we’ is not distinguishable from the subjective ‘we’ unless one adds a postpositional particle next to the ‘*u-ri*’ and the ‘*chǒ-hi*.’ The

[co-]being of all e three (the addresser, the addressee, and the third party) is *presupposed* in this ‘we.’

An answer for why the Korean ‘we’ is more than a collection of ‘I’s related to the ‘we’ points not at the ‘we’ as an extended self which extinguishes the notion of plurality in the ‘we,’ but at the ‘we’ as an extended self that is a pre-subjective ‘we’ that yields room for individual selves, or a post-subjective ‘we’ that is formed after the gathering of individual selves. From this analysis, the conclusion that ‘we’ can draw is not an answer, but a new question: Can clusivity be both a pre-subjective and a post-subjective concept?

This pre-subjective ‘we’ is possible not through overlapped or proactively shared memories or histories, but through space, where they *are* together, which is to say by literally ‘being there.’ Their spatio-temporal being-together in the ‘we’ is possible through their being-there (Da-sein). The time-space construction in the structure of this ‘we’ as ‘(together)-being-there’ could be expected to tell us something that the concepts of *Weltkoexistenz* by Husserl and *In-der-Welt-Sein* by Heidegger have not precisely revealed to us as of yet, where ‘my’ individual time-consciousness or temporality of the ‘I’ is constituted ‘here’ while ‘you’ are ‘there’ rather than constituting ‘our’ time.

Phenomenological Research on ‘We’ in Korean

1. The Aim of the Research

The ‘phenomenological we’ and empathy are fashionable themes in contemporary European philosophy. However, these concepts need to

be dealt with not only from the European continental perspective; research should also extend its realm to non-European contexts. This paper specifically focuses on the ‘we’ in Korean. In Korean, the ‘we’ is not merely the plural of ‘I’s. This Korean concept comes with a fairly different spectrum of meanings than that of the Germanic languages. This could further highlight the lively concept of ‘world-coexistence’ and be used to more deeply explore ‘empathy’ through the particular personal and academic background of the researcher as a Korean person. Even Husserl on a few occasions goes so far as to speak of a kind of empathy involved in appropriating foreign traditions (Husserl 1973c, 436; 2006, 372-373, see also Zahavi 2013, 136).

This paper does not, however, aim to promote the peculiar case of the Korean concept ‘we’ in order to situate it next to its counterparts in European philosophy. It rather aims to set one initial attempt to widen the range, not of European nor Korean, but of general philosophical understanding. It does so by introducing a phenomenological analysis of a specific case of the Korean concept of ‘we,’ in the hope of unveiling a new perspective in traditional phenomenology with particular respect to *verwirklichen* in the Husserlian spirit of philosophy which advocates openness in philosophical thinking.

The task is not to discover all explainable rules and linguistic patterns of the ‘we’ in all existing languages, but to conform to the phenomenological method of analyzing the understanding of self thereby enlarge our philosophical perspectives. This article analyzes the ‘we’ in the Korean language as a flint to strike a fire, to challenge the

exclusive research perspective of the phenomenological, or rather philosophical studies of subjectivity and intersubjectivity which claim to be the universal understanding of human beings; as one of the most well-known philosophical paroles proclaims “as long as ‘we’ exist as human beings, philosophy lies in our existence.” There is no philosophy that does not start from the actual existence of an individual human being. Traditional European philosophy has, in a way, deleted the ‘other side’ of the world from their ‘universal’ research. However, this does not mean pushing ‘anti-Europe’ or anti-(European)-philosophy, which would impede the process of recovering the ‘conversation’ with the other.

What I insist upon here is that traditional philosophy needs to reach out more in order to have not only a wider but also deeper insight of our understanding about ourselves and the world. This research on the phenomenological ‘we’ and the Korean ‘we’ stands as one attempt to contribute to a much-discussed theme in contemporary phenomenology, namely social intentionality, with a new ‘horizon’ of understanding.

2. Why Phenomenology?

Then why a phenomenological analysis of the ‘we’? Bernasconi’s description of phenomenology provides an answer to this question: “phenomenology’s distinctiveness lies in its sensitivity to the question of how the investigator gains access to what is to be investigated” (Bernasconi 2009, 204).

How can an investigator gain access to the ‘we’? When it comes to researching the ‘we,’ I want to start to investigate *how* ‘we’ can say ‘we’ at all rather than starting with the premise that ‘we’ say ‘we.’ However,

I can only start from my practice of saying ‘we.’ This action of ‘saying’ is fundamentally grounded in the language(s) that I use. For me to be able to say ‘we’ means that I can say ‘we,’ ‘wir,’ ‘u-ri,’ ‘chō-hi,’ etc.

To what then must this investigation be sensitive? And how can an investigator gain and maintain this sensitivity? If a phenomenological investigator is required to switch off her mother-tongue in order to adjust her way of thinking so as to have access to a phenomenological research method in order to investigate in Germanic languages, in part because the language and the system of ‘traditional’ philosophy is considered to be found in Germanic languages, where then can this investigator acquire the sensitivity needed for this investigation?

This absurd situation is comparable with the situation of the phenomenology of religion. Can a phenomenologist investigate a religion completely unrelated to her religious background? Here what is meant by ‘religious’ also includes the case of the investigator having an atheist or non-religious stance. Bernasconi writes:

Precisely which religions are open to the individual investigator are determined in advance by the investigator’s personal life story. To learn about other religions, the phenomenologist has to revert to the testimony of other investigators and draw parallels that assume what is to be established. This restricts the range of phenomena available for investigation at the very time when the phenomenology is trying to be most open. (Bernasconi 2009, 205)

In this context, ‘we’ should ask again: can an investigator of the ‘we’ think of the ‘we’ detached from the practices of saying ‘we’ in her mother-tongue language? The investigator has to constantly ask herself how she can retain her sensitivity and her phenomenological method with the utmost degree of openness. Each investigator’s personal life story starts with her language. This leads us naturally to our next question: why Korean?

3. Why Korean?

Why Korean? Why do non-Koreans have to care about an analysis of the Korean ‘we’? This simple question calls for a change of paradigm, a transformation in the way of thinking. Surprisingly, there are other dimensions of the phenomenology of intersubjectivity that are not based on the single linguistic ground of Germanic languages. “Die Sprache ist ein Transformationsmittel” (Paul Valéry, quoted from Elberfeld 2007, 26). Language can function as a means of transformation only under the condition that it enables conversations. In other words, language that makes this transformation possible *communicates*. Philosophy could become “a mediator,” says Hannah Arendt, “between many truths, not because it holds the one truth valid for all men, but because only in reasoned communication can what each man believes in his isolation from all others become humanly and actually *true*.” (Arendt 1994, 442: see also Schenkenberger 2018). The language of philosophy can remain vital and strong only when it *communicates*.

One privilege of this research lies, ironically, in that the kind of approach that reaches out to other cultures has seldom been taken

seriously in the traditional phenomenological context. At first sight, it almost feels as if it is beyond our capability to understand when you find out that in Malagasy the distinction between subject and object is not naturally conceived. The question of “how on earth can ‘we’ think without the concepts of subject and object?” reminds one of question “can non-Europeans think?” raised by Hamid Dabashi, who also specifically asks, “Why is European philosophy ‘philosophy,’ but African philosophy ‘ethnophilosophy’?” (Dabashi 2013).

As I was giving a lecture in Antananarivo, Madagascar, I was told that the Malagasy people could not naturally understand, based on their language, the distinction between the subjective ‘I’ and the objective ‘I,’ as in the *Ich = Ich* formulation. They explained that it is because at the moment they ‘understand’ an object, this object becomes a part of themselves. In this context, the ‘I-Thou’ and the ‘I-it’ relationship, for example, should be laid out in line within a different spectrum of understanding.

Karl Löwith also tried to go beyond the conventional understanding of the theological boundaries of the discourse on intersubjectivity conforming to Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ model, but he came at it from a different path than Kojima. For him, ‘being-together-with-each-other’ (*Miteinandersein*) and communication are crucial for understanding the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘thou,’ and therefore in this context language plays a primary role, which is the first thing that enables communication at all (see Löwith 1928, 148f). However, insofar as Dabashi criticizes other ‘traditional’ philosophers (Dabashi 2013),

Löwith is also implicated, as his range of language was only European; he could neither read nor speak non-European languages. I do not intend to underestimate his philosophy nor fetishize minority languages and their special linguistic characters here. However, this is a noteworthy but also not uncommon example that shows how firmly and fundamentally the system of traditional philosophy is based and structured on a basically mono-lingual background.

So, why Korean? I have a blunt, true, and very personal but also phenomenological answer: because I speak Korean. I can think, categorize, understand, imagine, dream, and communicate in Korean. Why not Korean?

4. Previous Research on ‘We’ in Korean

There are studies not only from a linguistic point of view in language pedagogy (Ju, Woal-Rang 2013, Jeong, Kyeong-Ouk 2005), but also from the perspectives of Korean studies (Choi, Jun-Sik 2016), of Chinese literature (Jung, Jae-Seo 2010, 2011), and of comparative philosophy (Lee, Kwang_Sae 2006) that have examined the meaning of Korean identity connected to the ‘we’ concept, yet this ‘we’ applies only to those with a Korean identity, i.e. their ‘we’ indicates only ‘we Koreans.’ Yong-Hyeok Kwon (2012) and Su-Jung Kim (2002) treat ‘we’ in the context of an East Asian family community culture, in which they try to define the particularity of this family community compared to an individualistic social structure.

Similarly, Dae-Ho Cho (2002) studied the manner of communication of Koreans in order to examine and criticize the social structure of Korea.

Cho argues that there are basically no personal pronouns in Korean, and that ‘we’ contains a different meaning than that of the Germanic languages, but this research is without a detailed analysis of the ‘we.’ These studies show some examples of how the concept ‘we’ is applied in Korean and the social contexts that accompanies it; however, the present research method is focused on illustrating the facts of Korean phenomena, rather than dealing with the ‘we’ in a phenomenological/existential sense.

In social and political philosophy, Yoon-ki Hong, Seok-Su Kim, Yoo-Seon Lee, and Ui-Soo Kim (2001) present their new identity-subject theories for a globalized society, in which the ‘we’ as an East-Asian community value is partially suggested as an alternative to the concept of subjectivity, which is typical of the Western way of thinking. For this approach, however, it is hard to escape the criticism that it is fundamentally based on the naïve dichotomy of the East-West paradigm, in the belief that the one side supplements what is insufficient from the other. The Korean ‘we’ is, in this context, not only analyzed on a conventional level, but also treated as if it could, in its representation of Eastern values and wisdom, substitute for, or at least amend, the old-fashioned concept of subjectivity.

Conclusion

We started an analysis of the ‘we’ with the following questions:

- (1) Is the ‘we’ more than a collection of ‘I’s (individuals)?
- (2) Can the ‘we’ precede ‘I’ and ‘you’?

(3) Is there a place for a third ‘other’ in the structure of the we?

Our investigation into the way ‘we’ is used in the Korean language could give us some clues to these questions. So far, we could conclude that the possessive form of the ‘we’ in Korean as ‘our *someone*’ unfolds a new dimension of the this ‘we,’ because this ‘our *someone*’ is not structured from within the ‘I-Thou’ formulation, and it thereby opens space for the third party in this ‘we’ group, including someone who is not present between the addresser (I) and the addressee (you), and an unrelated addresser can also refer to the third other as ‘our *someone*.’

In English, this is expressed only in the possessive form ‘our,’ as distinguished from the subject form ‘we,’ but in Korean the subjective and the possessive form are not distinguished. Therefore, ‘our *someone*’ in Korean is also often said without the implication or connotation of a state or an action of possession. To native Korean speakers, ‘our *someone*’ does not sound different from ‘we *someone*,’ as if there were ‘we’ as *someone* and *someone* as ‘we.’ After this ‘we’ dissolves and breaks down into ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and *someone else*, there comes ‘I,’ ‘you,’ and *someone*. In this sense, I argue that this ‘we’ is pre-subjective, which means that this ‘we’ precedes ‘I’ and ‘you,’ i.e. the ‘we’ is not always a result of the agglomeration of ‘I’ and ‘you.’

This particular formulation of ‘we’ as ‘our *someone*’ does not take ‘I’ as a prerequisite of this ‘we.’ This ‘we’ does not necessarily need to be made up of individuals associated with being members of or identifying with a group, but instead acts as an extended self, in which the ‘we’ is large enough for the ‘other’ to come in. This *someone* in ‘our *someone*’

is not solely another individual who is not 'I' or not a part of 'I,' but this *someone* exists in the 'we' as 'our *someone*' with the addresser and also the addressee according to the situation. This 'we' as an extended self is not a collection of 'I's and *someone* else or other 'I's, nor is it a plural of 'I.' The idealistic process whereby 'I' objectify myself ('I') to have the concept of 'I,' then perceive *someone* or 'you' as not-'I,' and then add these not-'I's to form 'we' is rather a subsequent theorem than a prerequisite in this case of the 'we.' As extended self in the form of 'our *someone*,' 'we' is not formed after the process of 'I' adding another 'I' to her 'I'-ness. This 'we,' which precedes 'I' and 'you,' therefore, is not a collection of 'I's.

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