



Williams and Dussel on opacity: toward a non-totalizing method

Williams y Dussel sobre la opacidad: hacia un método no totalizador

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.48204/2805-1815.8486>

INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO	ABSTRACT/RESUMEN
Recibido el: 16/7/2025 Aceptado el: 29/9/2025 Keywords: Opacity, methodology, ethical theory, totality, structuralism Palabras clave: Opacidad, metodología, teoría ética, totalidad, estructuralismo	Abstract: This paper examines the role of opacity in the thought of Bernard Williams and Enrique Dussel, and develops a philosophical method oriented toward non-totalization. In Williams's ethics, opacity marks the internal limits of moral justification: the individual cannot and should not make all aspects of their ethical life transparent to others or to themselves. Integrity, for Williams, resides not in public coherence but in the lived coherence of one's commitments, which remain partially inarticulable. In contrast, Dussel identifies opacity at the structural level—as the condition of exteriority that totalizing systems must exclude in order to sustain their coherence. Through his concept of analectics, Dussel maintains that this exclusion is not accidental but constitutive: the Other is not simply marginalized but rendered epistemically invisible. By placing these two accounts into dialogue, the paper argues that opacity should be treated not as a failure of knowledge or clarity, but as a methodological principle. This principle finds further support in recursive systems, where self-reference generates non-coincidence from within. The resulting framework affirms opacity as a condition of ethical, structural, and conceptual integrity. Rather than seeking philosophical totality, the method outlined here sustains the limits of systems as an active site of reflection. Opacity, in this sense, becomes not what philosophy must overcome, but with what it must think.

Resumen:

Este artículo examina el papel de la opacidad en el pensamiento de Bernard Williams y Enrique Dussel, y desarrolla un método filosófico orientado hacia la no-totalización. En la ética de Williams, la opacidad marca los límites internos de la justificación moral: el individuo no puede ni debe hacer completamente transparentes todos los aspectos de su vida ética, ni para los demás ni para sí mismo. La integridad, según Williams, no reside en la coherencia pública, sino en la coherencia vivida de los propios compromisos, que permanecen en parte inarticulables. En contraste, Dussel identifica la opacidad en un nivel estructural, como la condición de exterioridad que los sistemas totalizantes deben excluir para sostener su coherencia. A través de su concepto de analéctica, Dussel sostiene que esta exclusión no es accidental sino constitutiva: el Otro no es simplemente marginado, sino hecho epistemológicamente invisible. Al poner en diálogo estas dos concepciones, el artículo argumenta que la opacidad debe entenderse no como un fallo del conocimiento o de la claridad, sino como un principio metodológico. Este principio recibe apoyo adicional en sistemas recursivos, donde la autorreferencia genera no coincidencia desde dentro. El marco resultante afirma la opacidad como una condición de integridad ética, estructural y conceptual. En lugar de buscar la totalidad filosófica, el método aquí propuesto sostiene los límites de los sistemas como un sitio activo de reflexión. La opacidad, en este sentido, no es lo que la filosofía debe superar, sino aquello con lo que debe pensar.

Introduction – The Problem of Totalization

Philosophy has long been marked by the aspiration toward clarity, coherence, and systematic completeness. From the drive toward unifying metaphysical principles to the construction of normative frameworks that claim universal applicability, many philosophical traditions have assumed that to think well is to render things transparent: to eliminate ambiguity, resolve contradiction, and account for every relevant element within a single intelligible order. This aspiration—whether epistemological, ethical, or ontological—often presumes that the goal of thought is totalization. That is, philosophical systems tend to define themselves not only by what they include, but by their refusal to acknowledge what cannot be fully integrated. In this process, difference becomes deviation, ambiguity becomes error, and opacity becomes failure (Dussel, 1996; Williams, 1985).

This paper challenges that assumption. It argues that opacity is not a limit to be overcome, but a structural condition of thought itself. To think philosophically with integrity requires the ability to sustain, rather than eliminate, what cannot be totalized. Opacity here refers not to confusion or obscurity, but to a principled refusal of complete visibility—an acknowledgment that certain aspects of selfhood, relation, or system remain partially

inaccessible, not because they are unexamined, but because their very structure resists total articulation. In place of a philosophy that aims for closure, this paper proposes a method that begins from structural incompleteness.

This argument is developed through a comparative reading of two figures who, in distinct but complementary ways, resist the demand for totalization: Bernard Williams and Enrique Dussel. Although they emerge from different traditions—Williams from post-analytic moral philosophy and Dussel from Latin American philosophy of liberation—both thinkers articulate conceptions of ethical and structural life in which opacity plays a significant role. For Williams, opacity arises within the moral agent: it marks the limits of self-justification and the irreducibility of personal integrity (Williams, 1981). For Dussel, opacity appears at the edge of systems: it defines the relation between a totalized philosophical or political order and the excluded exteriority that makes it possible. Through his concept of *analectics*, Dussel maintains that this exclusion is not accidental but constitutive: the Other is not simply marginalized, but rendered epistemically invisible (Dussel, 1988).

By bringing Williams and Dussel into dialogue, the paper identifies a shared philosophical commitment: both thinkers refuse to reduce the complexity of lived experience to a fully intelligible system. They acknowledge that what remains partially inaccessible is not always a problem to be solved, but often a feature to be preserved. Williams defends the moral legitimacy of decisions and commitments that cannot be justified in terms of public reason, while Dussel insists that totalizing systems are blind to the conditions of their own construction. In both cases, opacity functions not as a regrettable deficiency, but as a condition of moral and political responsibility.

The paper then extends this insight into a third register: recursion. Drawing from systems theory and philosophical models of self-reference, it argues that opacity is not only a limit that appears at the edge of ethical or political life, but a product of internal structural dynamics. Recursive systems—systems that refer back to themselves—are inherently incomplete. They generate misalignment, delay, and non-coincidence not by accident, but by virtue of their very mode of operation (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Metzinger, 2003). The subject, understood as a recursive structure, cannot fully coincide with itself; its self-understanding is always mediated by temporal, interpretive, and

structural asymmetry. In this context, opacity emerges not from ignorance or exclusion, but from the reflexive structure of identity itself.

Taken together, these three accounts—Williams’s ethical opacity, Dussel’s structural exteriority, and recursive non-coincidence—form the basis for a general philosophical method. Rather than treating opacity as a deficiency to be eliminated, this method treats it as a positive condition for reflection. It resists the impulse to finalize, resolve, or enclose. It accepts that systems, selves, and ideas have limits that are constitutive rather than contingent. In doing so, it reframes opacity as a philosophical resource: a way of preserving fidelity to complexity, sustaining openness to the other, and thinking from within structural incompleteness.

The structure of the paper follows this trajectory. Next section examines Williams’s critique of moral transparency and the ethical role of opacity in maintaining personal integrity. Third section turns to Dussel’s critique of totalized philosophical systems and his proposal of analectics as a method of engaging with what lies outside their boundaries. Fourth section explores the internal dynamics of recursive systems, where self-reference produces structural non-coincidence and opacity arises from within. Fifth section synthesizes these accounts and proposes opacity as a general philosophical method, suitable for contexts in which transparency becomes an instrument of reduction or control. Sixth section concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of this method for philosophical practice.

What follows, then, is not a defense of obscurity, nor an argument against clarity. It is, rather, an effort to clarify the kinds of limits that clarity itself must respect. Opacity, when acknowledged as structural rather than accidental, opens a space for philosophical integrity—one in which the refusal of totalization becomes not a failure of rigor, but a condition of responsibility.

Opacity in Ethical Life: Bernard Williams and the Limits of Disclosure

Philosophy has long harboured the dream of complete intelligibility. Nowhere is this more evident than in moral theory, where the aspiration to render ethical life fully transparent – subject to articulation, justification, and public reason– has structured debates from Plato to contemporary moral constructivism. Yet this aspiration is not neutral. It carries with it an implicit conception of the moral agent as one who can, and should, make all things

clear: to others, to institutions, to themselves. Against this vision of moral lucidity, Bernard Williams introduces an alternative sensibility—one in which ethical life is pervaded by a kind of necessary opacity.

Williams's critique of moral theory hinges on the idea that certain features of ethical life cannot be fully captured by theoretical abstraction without distortion. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, he repeatedly challenges the pretension of moral philosophy to offer a comprehensive account of what one ought to do (Williams, 1985). For Williams, the demand for full moral transparency—particularly the demand to justify all actions in universally acceptable terms—violates the integrity of lived experience. Integrity, as he famously articulates it, is not reducible to rational coherence or impartial justification. Rather, it emerges from the coherence of one's character, projects, and self-understanding over time (Williams, 1981). The individual's relation to themselves and their history cannot always be made legible to others, nor should it be.

This emphasis on integrity reveals the ethical significance of opacity. Consider Williams's treatment of *moral luck*: the idea that moral responsibility is affected by factors outside the agent's control. In confronting this problem, Williams does not attempt to explain away luck in favour of a purified moral core. Instead, he embraces it as a constitutive feature of ethical life (Williams, 1981). To be a moral agent, for Williams, is to inhabit a world in which one's intentions, actions, and outcomes are not always aligned—and where the judgments of others may remain partial, if not opaque. The moral landscape is not a space of perfect visibility; it is structured by asymmetries, partial perspectives, and irreducible ambiguity.

Opacity here is not simply the limit of someone else's understanding. It is an internal feature of ethical life itself. The moral agent does not have complete access to their own motives, nor are they fully transparent to themselves in moments of decision. To demand full disclosure—to oneself or others—is to deny this fact and to install in its place a moral fiction. Williams's resistance to this fiction is not grounded in anti-rationalism or relativism. Rather, it is a defense of realism: a realism about the complexity of ethical life and the conditions under which human beings make decisions (Williams, 1985).

This realism resists the totalizing impulse of moral theory in two keyways. First, it affirms the irreducibility of context. Actions cannot be understood apart from the temporal,

emotional, and social entanglements in which they occur. A universalizing moral theory that strips away these entanglements in the name of clarity only succeeds in abstracting from the very life it aims to evaluate. Second, it affirms the value of non-justification. Some actions, Williams suggests, are not the result of general principles but arise from a deep fidelity to one's commitments or character. To force such actions into a justificatory framework—especially one aimed at impartial spectators—is to betray the very structure of the moral self (Williams, 1981).

In both respects, opacity functions as a moral principle. It marks the boundary of what should be made visible, rather than merely the failure to render something visible. In this way, opacity is not a problem to be solved, but a structural feature to be respected. Williams does not deny that ethical discussion, justification, and reflection are important. What he denies is that they are exhaustive. Ethical life, for him, always exceeds the reach of the theories that attempt to account for it (Williams, 1985).

This insight invites a deeper philosophical reconceptualization of opacity. Rather than viewing it as a contingent or regrettable limit—a byproduct of ignorance, irrationality, or social constraint—we can begin to see opacity as constitutive. That is, we can view it as a necessary condition of ethical agency. Without opacity, the agent would be reduced to a node of transparent decision-rules or public reason procedures. The space for moral development, ambiguity, and self-formation would collapse.

The idea that opacity is constitutive of ethical life has implications beyond the individual. It bears on our understanding of social institutions, interpersonal relations, and the very form of moral discourse. In institutions, the demand for transparency often disguises a deeper impulse to normalize, discipline, or foreclose ambiguity. The bureaucratic imperative to document and justify every action undercuts the possibility of moral discretion or depth. Williams's thought, while not explicitly institutional, points toward a critique of such moral managerialism. If integrity requires space for opacity, then any system that demands total legibility will risk eroding the conditions for moral agency itself.

Interpersonally, opacity enables respect. To recognize that the other is not fully accessible—that their inner life exceeds our grasp—is not a failure of empathy but a mark of ethical maturity. The insistence on full mutual transparency, often valorized in liberal

moral theory, can border on a form of epistemic aggression: a refusal to let the other remain partially veiled. Williams's emphasis on the partiality of moral understanding suggests an alternative ethos—one in which the acknowledgment of opacity becomes a condition for ethical relation, not its failure.

Importantly, opacity does not entail silence or retreat. It does not recommend a withdrawal from ethical reflection or conversation. Instead, it reconfigures the terms of such reflection. It asks us to accept that some aspects of the moral life are not fully articulable, and that this inarticulability is not a lack to be filled but a presence to be acknowledged. In this light, opacity becomes not just a feature of ethical life, but a method of philosophical thought—a mode of engaging with moral questions that resists the temptation to reduce them to transparent logic or universal code.

This methodological shift opens the way for a broader application of opacity as a structural principle. In the next sections, I will turn to Enrique Dussel's critique of totalizing reason and his proposal of *analectics*, where the exterior—the excluded, the unrepresented—forms the necessary boundary of philosophical systems. Through this, we will see how opacity can function not only within ethical self-understanding but as a mode of resisting systemic closure. The path from Williams to Dussel is not linear, but the conceptual bridge they share—an attentiveness to what escapes systematization—lays the groundwork for a general method of non-totalizing thought.

Exteriority and Analectics: Enrique Dussel's Critique of Totalized Reason

If Bernard Williams challenges the moral totalization of the individual—refusing the fantasy of full ethical transparency—Enrique Dussel poses an analogous challenge at the level of systems. Where Williams locates opacity within the self, Dussel finds it beyond the self, in the exterior: the irreducible outside that philosophical systems, institutions, and discourses exclude in order to stabilize themselves. In both cases, opacity is not merely a residue of ignorance but a structural remainder, a marker of what cannot be internalized without distortion. Dussel names this the problem of totality, and his proposed response—analectics—offers a method for encountering what lies beyond it.

Dussel's critique of totality draws on and departs from the dialectical tradition. Following Levinas and Marx, he argues that philosophical systems construct their

coherence by enclosing meaning within internal operations of mediation, synthesis, or negation. The dialectic, in its classical and Hegelian forms, absorbs contradiction into ever-higher unity, leaving nothing truly outside. But for Dussel, the exterior is not reducible to an internal moment of dialectical development. It is not a lack to be resolved but a presence that escapes and conditions the totality from without (Dussel, 1988). As Rodríguez Reyes (2022) notes, this departure reflects a broader transmodern project that refuses to collapse alterity into the logic of historical synthesis. The system is not all there is. Beyond it, there remains the Other—concrete, historical, and irreducibly opaque.

This philosophical move has deep ethical and political implications. It allows Dussel to locate violence not only in acts but in the structure of philosophical thought itself. When reason claims to speak universally, to represent all perspectives from within its own system, it erases the conditions of its own constitution. Colonial reason, Eurocentric modernity, and technocratic universality become instances not just of exclusion but of self-blindness: forms of thought that mistake their own horizon for the whole. In this sense, totality is a kind of epistemic closure—not because it cannot know everything, but because it cannot see what it excludes as constitutively outside (Dussel, 1988).

The concept of exteriority serves to mark this boundary. Unlike marginality, which implies a position within the system albeit at its edges, exteriority denotes what is not assimilable: what resists incorporation without remainder. This exteriority is not an unknowable mysticism; it is structured, situated, and historically real. It is the presence of those who have been rendered invisible by the totalizing system: the colonized, the exploited, the forgotten. Crucially, the exterior is not merely outside the content of philosophy—it marks a structural opacity in the form of philosophy itself. To the extent that philosophical systems depend on internal closure, they render themselves incapable of accounting for the conditions of their own possibility.

It is here that Dussel introduces analectics as a methodological alternative. If dialectics presumes that contradiction can always be subsumed, analectics maintains that some limits are not dialectically recoverable. Instead of overcoming the Other, analectics listens to it. The exterior is not an error to be corrected but a voice to be heard. Dussel describes analectical reason as a second ethics—one that arises not from within the

system but from the face of the excluded, invoking Levinas's notion of ethical transcendence, but anchoring it in material and historical structures (Dussel, 1988).

What makes Dussel's view particularly relevant to our inquiry is his insistence that the excluded Other remains unrepresentable within the system. Attempts to make the Other fully legible—to translate their position into the terms of the dominant order—risk repeating the very erasure they seek to repair. In this sense, Dussel's notion of exteriority is an epistemological opacity that serves a critical function. It refuses the demand for total intelligibility. It maintains that some dimensions of alterity cannot and should not be domesticated by philosophical clarity. To think otherwise is to reinscribe domination as method.

This methodological opacity challenges prevailing norms of philosophical justification. Where analytic traditions emphasize internal coherence and evidentiary sufficiency, Dussel insists on the importance of structural positionality—of where thought begins. For him, the validity of a claim is not separable from its situatedness: whether it emerges from the interior of the system or from the opacity of the exterior. Thought that originates from the latter cannot be measured by the standards of the former without distortion. This is not a call for relativism but for what might be termed epistemic asymmetry—a recognition that positions do not stand on equal grounds and that the transparency of one standpoint often depends on the opacity of another. Recent work by Sánchez-Pérez (2023) highlights how philosophical systems grounded in Western universality tend to misrecognize epistemic asymmetry as deficiency rather than structural location.

Opacity here is not an obstacle to philosophy but a resource for its reconstitution. Dussel does not propose to abandon systematicity or coherence altogether. Rather, he asks that we interrupt our systems at the point where they render invisible the voices that trouble them. In this sense, opacity functions as a critical threshold—not of knowledge, but of system-legibility. The Other's opacity signals the limit of systematization, the moment when the effort to understand must give way to the willingness to be addressed.

This move has clear affinities with Williams's ethics of non-totalization. Just as Williams resists the demand for full self-disclosure in the moral sphere, Dussel resists the philosophical demand to render all alterity transparent. In both cases, opacity protects

something essential: the integrity of the moral agent for Williams, and the dignity of the excluded subject for Dussel. But where Williams emphasizes personal coherence, Dussel emphasizes structural relation. His philosophy is not centered on the individual but on the historically mediated asymmetry between the speaking subject and those denied voice. Thus, Dussel extends opacity from ethical agency to ontological structure.

Importantly, Dussel's account of exteriority is not merely a negative gesture. It also offers a positive vision of philosophical method. Analectics requires not only critique, but a reorientation of philosophical attention. Rather than seeking to master the totality, the philosopher must attune themselves to what interrupts it. This involves a shift in the topology of thought: from systems that enclose to structures that remain perforated, incomplete, open to the voice of the Other. This openness is not a void but a condition of renewal. It allows philosophy to be addressed by what it cannot fully comprehend.

We might think of this as a practice of structural listening. In contrast to hermeneutic models that presume interpretive access, structural listening accepts that some discourses do not yield themselves to comprehension on familiar terms. Their opacity is not failure but fidelity—to their own historicity, to the silences imposed on them, to the asymmetries that sustain systems of thought. For Dussel, this listening is not passive; it is the beginning of critique. Vizcaíno (2021) describes a similar orientation in terms of anti-fetishist method, where fidelity to the Other's inassimilable presence becomes the ground for decolonial critique. It is how philosophy becomes accountable to what it has excluded.

Thus, opacity returns—now not as moral condition but as ontological and epistemological orientation. It marks the boundary where systems fail to account for their own exclusions, and where method must yield to encounter. This does not render philosophy impossible. On the contrary, it opens philosophy to what lies beyond its habitual form: to what is opaque, exterior, and yet still pressing.

In the next section, I turn to the recursive structures of identity and meaning, where opacity does not arise from exteriority alone but from internal self-reference—the failure of systems to coincide with themselves. There, we will see how opacity can also emerge from within: not as exclusion, but as structural recursion. Together, these views converge

toward a general model of non-totalizing thought, in which opacity functions not as limit, but as method.

Recursive Identity and Structural Non-Coincidence

Opacity is not only what lies beyond the system. It also emerges from within. If Bernard Williams shows that the ethical self is partially opaque to itself, and Enrique Dussel shows that systems occlude what lies beyond them, then a third dimension of opacity comes into view when we examine recursion: the structure by which a system, subject, or process refers to itself in order to constitute or maintain identity. In recursive systems, opacity arises not because something is outside, hidden, or excluded—but because the system cannot fully coincide with its own operations. This is a structural opacity: an internal limit that arises from the dynamics of self-reference itself.

To say that a system is recursive is to say that it loops—its outputs become its inputs, its later states feed back into its earlier conditions. This is most obvious in computational systems, where recursive functions call themselves as subroutines. But recursion is not only a technical feature. It is a broader structural logic that appears in biological systems (Maturana & Varela, 1980), linguistic interpretation (Chomsky, 1965), symbolic cognition (Dennett, 1991), and indeed, in selfhood. The subject, as both a temporal and cognitive structure, is recursive: it recognizes itself, projects its future onto itself, interprets its past as part of itself. And yet in doing so, it never fully arrives at itself. Every act of self-reference produces a residue—an ungrasped difference—that cannot be resolved within the loop.

This residue is not noise or error. It is a necessary feature of recursion itself. To constitute identity through self-reference is to construct an internal delay: a point at which the system folds back but cannot complete the circuit. This is what I call structural non-coincidence. The system reflects itself but never fully aligns with the reflection. What appears as identity is always displaced—what I am refers to what I was, anticipates what I will be, recognizes what I project—but never settles into self-sameness. The recursive self is inherently skewed, not through accident but through structure.

This skew is a form of opacity. The recursive subject cannot fully bring itself into view because it is constituted by the movement of self-differentiation. There is no “center” of the system from which full transparency could be achieved. Every center would itself

be a product of recursion. The desire for coincidence—between self and self, or system and ground—is structurally undermined by the very operations that make selfhood possible. As a result, opacity arises not as external resistance but as internal reflexivity.

This account deepens and radicalizes the insights of Williams and Dussel. For Williams, opacity is a condition of ethical integrity; for Dussel, it marks the exteriority that totalized systems cannot incorporate. But in both cases, opacity appears as something *outside* the dominant mode of understanding—as an ethical remainder or a political interruption. What recursion shows is that opacity does not merely interrupt systems from without; it constitutes them from within. There is no totality, not only because systems exclude, but because they cannot close over themselves. Identity, meaning, and thought are inherently incomplete—not by omission, but by structural recursion.

This has critical consequences for how we understand philosophical method. If philosophy seeks coherence, transparency, and justification, then recursion reveals the cost of such ideals. It is not that coherence is impossible in principle; it is that coherence is always bought at the price of internal simplification. To render the self-transparent is to abstract from its recursive complexity. To make a system intelligible in its entirety is to suppress its non-coincidence. Opacity, then, is not a flaw in philosophical method but a trace of what such method must suppress to sustain itself.

Recursive systems model this suppression. In computation, recursion is only tractable when it terminates or stabilizes. In language, recursive structures require interpretive heuristics to resolve ambiguity. In cognition, recursive self-models function heuristically—they do not disclose a “true self” but enable navigation through an unstable one (Metzinger, 2003). In each case, what allows the system to operate also renders it partially opaque: the system does not “know itself” completely but iterates a provisional self-understanding through feedback. The loop is not a mirror but a structuring delay—a deferral of identity.

This delay structures philosophical reflection as well. When philosophy reflects on its own foundations—when it engages in meta-philosophy—it enters a recursive loop. It attempts to account for its own operations, justify its own norms, or ground its own authority. But this gesture never lands. There is always a gap between the system that reflects, and the system reflected. Every claim to grounding becomes another element

within the loop, and thus subject to the same displacement. This is not relativism. It is a recognition that foundational closure is structurally unachievable—not because we have not found the right system, but because the act of self-grounding is itself recursive.

Opacity is what emerges at the limit of this reflexivity. It is not the unknown, nor the mysterious. It is the structured non-closure of systems that cannot grasp themselves entirely. Recursion models this precisely: the point at which the output of the system loops back, creating a horizon that shifts with every cycle. In this sense, opacity is a temporal artifact—a condition produced by the system’s movement through time. The recursive self is never fully present to itself because it is always in delay, never at rest. It is always approaching, never arriving.

This account aligns closely with phenomenological insights into temporality. Husserl’s model of internal time-consciousness, for example, presents consciousness as a flow constituted by retention and protention—the recursive relation to just-past and just-to-come (Husserl, 1991). The self is not a point but a span, structured by its recursive relation to absence. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty describes bodily subjectivity as a form of temporal folding, where habit and anticipation structure perceptual presence (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). In both accounts, the self is not a fixed substance but a recursively spaced temporality, marked by non-coincidence. Opacity, again, is not an obstruction but a structural articulation of this spacing.

This spacing also has ethical implications. If identity is recursively constituted and structurally incomplete, then no subject is ever fully legible—to others or to themselves. This undercuts ethical models that assume transparency, consistency, or unified agency. It supports instead a model of ethical life attuned to ambiguity, delay, and partiality—not as failures to overcome, but as intrinsic conditions. Williams approached this insight obliquely; Dussel framed it in structural terms. Recursion shows how these features emerge from the very constitution of the subject.

We can now see how opacity functions at three levels: (1) the moral integrity of the agent (Williams), (2) the structural exclusion of the Other (Dussel), and (3) the recursive incompleteness of self-reference (this section). Each level displaces the fantasy of totalization. Each reveals a form of opacity as structure: not a limit imposed from outside,

but a necessary condition of systems that seek to know, to ground, or to represent themselves.

This reframing of opacity prepares the ground for what I will call opacity as method. If recursive systems necessarily entail non-coincidence, then the philosophical method appropriate to such systems must not seek total grasp but must remain attuned to the structural folds that make understanding possible. In the next section, I articulate this stance directly—not as a retreat from rigor, but as a commitment to a form of thought that can sustain itself without the illusion of totality.

Opacity as Method: Toward a Non-Totalizing Philosophical Practice

Opacity is often treated as a failure: a failure of knowledge, a failure of communication, a failure of structure to render itself intelligible. Within dominant philosophical traditions—especially those shaped by rationalism, transcendental grounding, or systemic coherence—opacity tends to mark a problem to be overcome. But the preceding analyses suggest a different orientation. Opacity is not merely a negative limit imposed from the outside; it is a constitutive condition that arises at every level of philosophical engagement: ethical, structural, and recursive. What emerges from this triangulation is the possibility of opacity as method—a mode of philosophical reflection that affirms incompleteness, resists closure and maintains fidelity to that which thought cannot incorporate without distortion.

Opacity, as developed through Bernard Williams, protects the moral self from the demand to fully disclose its interiority. For Enrique Dussel, opacity marks the boundary between a system and what it necessarily excludes in order to function. And from the vantage of recursion, opacity emerges from within: as the structural displacement that arises when a system loops back onto itself. In each case, opacity is not incidental. It is a condition for the possibility of integrity, critique, and reflexivity. If it were eliminated, what would remain is not a purified form of thought, but a collapsed one—either morally hollow, epistemically imperial, or structurally incoherent.

To treat opacity as method is to adopt a particular stance toward philosophical systems and their limits. It is to reject the idea that philosophy must aspire to totality—whether in the form of comprehensive theories, final grounds, or universally shared criteria of justification. It is to treat non-coincidence as a condition of thinking rather than

a failure to be repaired. And it is to recognize that certain forms of abstraction, systematization, or generalization will always entail a loss of remainder—a forgetting of what cannot be reduced to order.

This methodological stance has historical precedent. In continental traditions, it resonates with negative dialectics, deconstruction, and post-phenomenological critiques of presence. In Anglophone traditions, it echoes skeptical traditions and recent work in moral epistemology and feminist standpoint theory. But opacity as method differs from each of these: it does not derive from skepticism about knowledge, nor from a critique of representation, nor from a commitment to alterity as such. Rather, it emerges from a structural insight: those certain systems—ethical, political, cognitive, ontological—produce opacity through their own operations, and that to philosophize responsibly within such systems is to acknowledge that production without denying meaning.

To adopt opacity as method is not to abandon clarity. On the contrary, it demands a more disciplined clarity: one that can distinguish between precision and totalization, between conceptual articulation and metaphysical enclosure. It is to practice philosophy with an awareness of its thresholds: the point at which reflection turns back on itself and generates not insight, but delay. It is to acknowledge, as Williams does, that ethical life includes commitments that cannot be publicly justified without distortion (Williams, 1981). It is to accept, with Dussel, that some philosophical systems are blind to the conditions of their own construction (Dussel, 1988). And it is to understand, through recursion, that identity—whether personal or conceptual—is not a stable unity but a loop marked by structural misalignment (Metzinger, 2003).

Opacity, in this methodological sense, becomes a discipline of non-closure. It urges the philosopher not to evade structure, but to remain attuned to the moment when structure turns against itself. It encourages a form of conceptual patience: a willingness to think in proximity to what resists being made fully intelligible. This is not mysticism. It is a rational encounter with the fact that some concepts deform under pressure, and that such deformation is not always a flaw, but sometimes a signal.

One of the risks of opacity as method is that it may be mistaken for quietism. If totalization is impossible, why build structures at all? Why not surrender thought to the undecidable, the ineffable, the unstructured? The answer is that opacity as method does

not suspend structure—it complicates its use. It affirms that structures are necessary for thought but refuses the idea that they are ever final. It commits to articulation, but not to closure. In this sense, opacity is less a retreat than an ethics of modelling: it understands that all philosophical representations are partial, recursive, and temporally delayed. It asks of the philosopher not silence, but structural humility.

This humility does not flatten argument or prevent conceptual rigor. On the contrary, it often intensifies the precision of philosophical work. To think opaquely is not to abandon clarity—it is to clarify the conditions under which clarity itself is produced. For instance, a theory of justice that pretends to cover all cases will obscure its blind spots; a theory that acknowledges its opacity—its dependence on interpretive gaps, on local judgment, on contested historical frameworks—will be more accurate precisely because it refuses universality. Methodological opacity thus enables a greater fidelity to structure, not less.

Philosophy, at its best, makes possible a sustained encounter with complexity. But that encounter requires limits. Opacity names not what we have not yet thought, but what cannot be reduced without remainder. It is the name for the residue that all systems leave behind. It is the structuring delay in recursion, the ethical silence in selfhood, the excluded voice at the boundary of reason. To incorporate opacity as method is to build systems with their thresholds intact—to leave spaces unsealed, not out of indecision, but out of recognition.

This recognition has a formal component. It shifts the criteria by which philosophical work is evaluated. Rather than asking only whether a system is complete, it also asks whether it is aware of its incompleteness. Rather than seeking coherence at all costs, it allows for patterned inconsistency—for partial structures that maintain internal rigor without global closure. It allows for footnotes that signal absence, for arguments that double back, for conclusions that do not resolve but hold open. These are not marks of weakness; they are the signs of a method attuned to the non-totalizing logic of thought itself. As Vizcaíno (2021) argues, the commitment to anti-fetishist critique entails exactly this kind of methodological stance—one in which the refusal to close meaning becomes a form of decolonial rigor.

Moreover, opacity as method is not only epistemological—it is political. In resisting totalization, it also resists domination. Dussel's critique of Eurocentric reason is not only

a call for inclusion; it is a demand that philosophy account for what it structurally forgets. To apply opacity methodologically is to listen not only to what a system says, but to what it renders unsayable. It is to build frameworks that remain open to disruption—not out of fragility, but out of principled incompleteness. As Sánchez-Pérez (2023) emphasizes, philosophical responsibility requires resisting the impulse to fold all difference into intelligible sameness. This is not a weakness to be overcome. It is a condition of responsibility.

Finally, opacity as method changes what it means to philosophize across traditions. It rejects the assimilation of one framework into another, or the translation of all difference into shared terms. Instead, it allows traditions to speak obliquely to one another: to resonate, to refract, to unsettle. It accepts that some concepts will not be recoverable without loss, and that this loss must be marked. In doing so, opacity becomes a practice of philosophical hospitality—not an openness that dissolves the other into the same, but one that receives the other without demand for full legibility.

As this paper has shown, opacity is not merely a topic within philosophy. It is a condition that marks philosophy's own recursive structure. To recognize this is not to despair, but to refine one's method: to philosophize from within incompleteness, without seeking to erase it. Opacity, understood as a methodological stance, does not paralyze inquiry. It disciplines it—by maintaining the structural folds, recursive delays, and ethical asymmetries that make philosophy both possible and necessary.

In the concluding section, I will draw together the implications of this orientation—suggesting how opacity, as a methodological commitment, reshapes our understanding of philosophical rigor, system, and cross-traditional dialogue.

Conclusion: Philosophy Without Totalization

Opacity is not a hindrance to philosophical thought—it is its horizon. From the ethical irreducibility of the self to the structural asymmetry of system and exterior, to the recursive displacement within identity itself, opacity marks the points at which philosophy must relinquish the dream of totality. This relinquishment is not a loss but a methodological gain. It allows philosophy to think from within its own incompleteness: to build without finality, to reflect without mastery, to encounter without absorption.

To adopt opacity as method is to remain attentive to the folds and failures that give systems shape. It is to construct concepts that are rigorous without being exhaustive, and to engage across traditions without the demand for full equivalence. Such a method does not unify but configures—a practice of thought shaped by delay, non-coincidence, and respect for what resists articulation. In this way, philosophy becomes not a system of knowledge but a disciplined openness to what remains outside, unassimilated, and yet structurally central.

This openness is not a passive condition but a demand. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues, to think from the underside of modernity is not merely to revise existing systems, but to transform the philosophical stance itself—to shift from control to receptivity, from mastery to accountability. Opacity, in this register, becomes a practice of refusal: a way of denying philosophy the authority to assimilate everything into its own terms.

Opacity, then, is not what philosophy must overcome. It is what philosophy, at its most honest, begins from—and returns to, in every act of reflection that refuses to seal the world within a closed and final form.

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