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Appendix—The Modernist Self

Famously, Descartes posited that God could not trick him about his own self-consciousness. With this general understanding, he initiated modern philosophy’s attempt to establish epistemological foundations with the certainty of himself as “a thinking thing,” a notion based on a rather simple deduction about the certainty of one’s own self-awareness. This certainty is, after all, the product of the commonsensical view that a self is “essentially a subject of experience … of inner conscious presence. It’s the kind of thing human beings have had in mind … in talking of ‘my inmost self,'” namely that thing which thinks and experiences (Strawson 2009, 9).

Reflexivity had appeared as a trope of understanding the subject during the early modern period, which is hardly surprisingly considering the preoccupation with optics, on the one hand, and cognitive introspection, on the other.

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1 The subject-object cognitive schema requires two metaphysical domains: res extensa (material in all its forms) and res cogitans (the mind). Man was the site of their exchange. Descartes’ early critic, Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) objected to the entire enterprise: “Even though you recognize that you think, you do not know of what nature you, who think, are… [Like a blind man] on feeling heat and being told it proceeds from the sun, should think he has a clear and distinct idea of the sun, inasmuch as, if anyone ask him what the sun is, he can reply: “It is something that produces heat” … [Y]ou have a clear and distinct idea of yourself? You say you are not extended [material]; but in so doing you say what you are not, not what you are. In order to have a clear and distinct idea, or, what is the same thing, a true and genuine idea of anything, is it not necessary to know the thing itself positively, and so to speak affirmatively, or does it suffice to know that it is not any other thing?” (Gassendi 1970, 197). Descartes’ self-assurance that he knew that he thought is insufficient to make the jump that he has substantive knowledge of what that “thinking thing” is.
“Reflexive” as used to refer to “thought as bending back upon itself” first appears in the 1640s, when theologians, philosophers, and poets embarked on an introspective inquiry only to stop at some point to redirect consciousness into the world. Indeed, reflection as perception of oneself or attention to what is in us organized the Cartesians. However, one almost forgotten Henry Jeans (an obscure English minister, 1611–1662), appreciated the infinite regress encoded in reflectivity: “Then the mind in its reflexive workings can proceed in infinitum” (Jeans 1656, 42). Such self-reflection fails to find a definable bedrock of the ego’s is-ness that can be held as some object. Commonly understood, we are selves in the world, and our actions, speech, and behaviors hang on a designated person. Yet the question remains, beneath the clothes of our behaviors, what holds all of these components of identity intact? In essence, self-reflection regards my self in the same way a third-party observer (whether through self-consciousness or another) sees me. This is the foundation upon which Descartes built his entire epistemology.

Locke extended Descartes’ construction for a full-fledged philosophy of the self as a neutral, rational, and independent “knowing agent.” That description in turn derived from an ideal of objectified science. Such a detached witness might study nature dispassionately and thereby obtain scientific truth. This atomistic (or core) self was part of early modern scientific theory, which held that objectivity required separation of the knowing agent from the world she inspected. Indeed, the Lockeian observer assumes the power to view the world neutrally, and thereby distance the mind “from all the particular features which are objects of potential change” (Taylor 1989, 171). The first-person viewpoint that demanded disengagement, would ideally become a “view from nowhere”—neutral and universal, where no perspective was favored (Nagel 1986). Here is the origin of modern positivism, namely, the idealized objective knower. This newly conceived observer achieved a universal standing when extrapolated to the civil world as a political agent (the basis of citizen autonomy at the expense of monarchical authority) and soon became the ideal of individualized personhood in broader cultural and psychological respects.

Identity did not take on its current psychological connotations until Locke called into question the unity of the self in his magisterial, Essay Concerning Human Understanding (chapter 27, 1689). Selfhood had not been identified as

2 At approximately the same time, “‘conscious’ as meaning ‘inwardly sensible or aware’ appears first in 1620, ‘consciousness’ or ‘the state of being conscious’ in 1678, and ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘consciousness of one’s thoughts, etc.’ in 1690. In German the equivalent terms are found in the same period . . .” (Whyte 1978, 42–43).
a philosophical issue so long as the traditional Christian conception of the soul held sway, but it became a problem when Locke declared that human identity is ephemeral and based in fluctuating consciousness whose unification of successive states is held together only by an incomplete and imperfect memory. In other words, the self is not a thing as Descartes had asserted and, moreover, Locke failed to provide a means by which identity cohered beyond the continuity of memory. He made no attempt to offer a philosophical basis for the self as such.

Despite the elegance of Locke’s construction, by the mid-eighteenth century, the cracks in the statue began to appear. Hume simply observed his own self-consciousness and noted that the self is but a “bundle … of different perceptions,” and because the fleeting perceptions of his consciousness could not coalesce around a self, he concluded, that “all the nice and subtile questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided …” (Hume 1978, 262). He thus dismissed the notion of a self “insofar as it is accessible through inner experience” that consists only of perceptions. In other words, he sought an epistemological basis for identifying the self and noted that because his self-consciousness was comprised of fleeting perceptions or thoughts, he “never can catch” himself “at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception” (ibid., 252).

And as he dismissed any such entity as the self, Hume also introduced the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness, the piecemeal aggregate of perceptions—fragmentary, often incoherent, frequently rationally disordered, and powerfully driven by the “passions.” Notwithstanding Descartes’s certainty of an ego as some basic organizing principle for me-ness, no one has satisfactorily offered a definition of what self-reflection is. How is a subjective mental state explained as arising from physical processes? What is the circuitry that provides self-reflection, I-ness, reasoning, etc.? Freud, the neurologist might have had confidence that a future “science of the mind” would bridge the so-called explanatory gap of the mind/body problem, but this promissory note cannot be assured of payment. There seems to be an irreconcilable difference of the first- and third-person perspectives: consciousness, the subjective experience of being, is inaccessible to objective studies. We can correlate physical

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3 Hume went on to write, “…and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties” (ibid.). Beyond asserting that the self “has no clothes,” i.e., no basis in fact, Hume laid the corner stone for Wittgenstein’s later faulty grammar argument that became a central theme of twentieth century philosophy (see Tauber 2013a, chapter 7; for overview, see Thiel 2011).
traces of some conscious processes, but there is no translation of the physicality to the subjective experience. In other words, subjectivity cannot be reduced to physical terms, and the argument in philosophical circles is whether this is an ontological or epistemological problem. This issue in many respects has nagged modernity from its very origins, namely the basis for understanding selfhood in terms of self-consciousness. Simply, what is such experience and what function might it serve?

Kant gave up the quest altogether and contented himself with defining the conditions for knowing. He concurred with Hume that the self cannot be construed as an entity and further agreed that the sense of a unitary self is the inevitable consequence of the mind’s structure. However, their respective interpretations differed. Hume thought the notion of selfhood is based on the activity of the imagination working on experiential material, while Kant argued that self-consciousness is a necessity of thought, a psychological construct that constitutes the necessary conditions for cognition:

Now no cognitions can occur in us, no connection and unity among them, without that unity of consciousness that precedes all data of the intuitions, and in relation to which all representation of objects is alone possible. This pure, original unchanging consciousness I will now name transcendental apperception. (Kant 1998, A 107, 232)⁴

Accordingly, the self is not an observable thing, but rather belongs to the noumenal domain—a something that is not part of the describable natural world. So beyond positing the requirements of an epistemological agent, Kant left in abeyance any other criteria for designating the ego’s what-ness and was content with accounting for self-awareness as a necessary condition of thought itself. For Kant, “I think” does not lead to the Cartesian ego, to some object, or to a soul. It means simply, and exactly what it says: “I think” expresses “our consciousness of being engaged in a mental activity we take to be our own” (Longuenesse 2017, 1). No further claims are made, or, according to Kant, can be made.

There are three claims (or features) for this faculty: identity, unity, and self-consciousness (Paton 1951, 102–105). The subject must be identical through time, for without such identity, the ability to recall and maintain continuity would fail. The basis of unity refers to the requirement of an active subject to

⁴ “Apperception” refers to a necessary condition of experience, i.e., the mental process by which an idea is assimilated to the body of previously derived ideas (see Pippin 1989, 19).
unify her experience. This ability in turn rests upon the third feature, that of self-consciousness, which refers to the capacity to reflect on its own unity and identity, a constitutive condition of experience. Thus, Kant argued for an active and self-aware consciousness. This construction fulfills Kant’s epistemological requirements of a knowing self, but more, the ability to self-reflect is demanded for his understanding of human autonomy. This construction became the foundation of selfhood construed as a moral category: for Kant, to be moral requires reasoned autonomy. Note, *das Ich*, “the I,” has shifted from an epistemological construct to a moral one. Simply, for Kant, the ego enterprise was architected to create an autonomous individual capable of exercising autonomous judgment.

In sum, instead of searching for a *something*, Kant posited the requirements of an epistemological agent, employed that schema for his ethical project, and left in abeyance any other criteria for designating the ego’s what-ness. He narrowed the inquiry to an account of self-awareness as a condition of thought itself. However, this description is not an explanation. Philosophically elegant, on what basis might his postulated structure be tested? Or better, known to be true? He provided a cogent model for the “transcendental requirements” of a knowing agent, but more, the ability to self-reflect is demanded for his understanding of human autonomy, the true telos of his presentation, i.e., selfhood construed as a moral category. For Kant, to be moral requires reasoned autonomy, a mind functioning self-reflexively, rationally, and independently (Schneewind 1998).

Kant’s successors during the Romantic period continued to wrestle with the problem of subjectivism, but one might fairly conclude by 1800 that the understanding of the self remained enigmatic. There is no stepping out of the self; no Archimedean point exists to appraise oneself and obtain a detached, rational perspective. Simply, we are radically contextualized and immersed within life. Accordingly, the self as such does not exist as an object or entity, but because of the very construction of agency built on the subject-object structure of our language, a knowing agent orders experience as a subject, as an ego. From that grammar, a self emerges. But once committed to that structure, a gap always exists between the subject (the epistemological agent) and the world. That is the defining characteristic of the modernist self irrespective of its various modifications. And this is the key point of the attacks launched by Hegel and later Romantics.