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Kant, The Subject and The Self

We must be clear here that we are interested in discerning what the relationship of the subject and the self are. Of course we cannot hope to achieve a strict definition of the self in terms of the subject. The question of personal identity, the self, the subject, all of these concepts would take more than a few pages to flesh out, even then we could not hope to understand the entire project of the philosophy of self. However our inquiry must have some sort of ground on which to stand, as such I propose the question, in what way has Kant influenced the contemporary discourse on the philosophy of self?

The best place to begin our inquiry should involve some conversation involving the very idea of ones-self, more succulently put the illusive “I” as the subject. Kant puts forth that the utterance “I think” places all of our thought in the terms of consciousness (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason 329). This self-reflexive statement is part of a philosophical moment that, until Kant, generated a wealth of ontologies and discourse regarding the self. So it is of no small consequence that the very idea “I think” is the foundational concept for Kant’s project. Why is this so? “ ‘I think’ is, therefore, the sole text of rational psychology, and from it the whole of its teaching has to be developed”(330). By rational psychology we can understand that Kant wants to avoid a treatise on empirical psychology. By allowing any sort of experience into his doctrine Kant would succumb to an empirical study of the self. In Kant’s own words “the least empirical predicate would destroy the rational purity of the science and its independence of all experience”(330). Now we must understand that all we have accomplished so far is to give a rough sketch of the assertion “I think” and the formulation of a rational psychology as the foundations for Kant’s project.

The very subject that we seem to be after is the 'I' as the representation of this subject. "I, as thinking, am an object of inner sense, and am called 'soul'"(329). For Kant the notion of 'I' must not be the culmination of concepts, which result in the final product 'I'. We cannot understand ourselves as any other than a simple thing, in Kant's terms, "We can assign no other basis for this teaching than the simple, and in itself completely empty, representation 'I'; and we cannot even say that this is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts"(331). The notion of the essence of consciousness for Kant points towards an inner awareness of one's own existence. By using the term being, I mean one's existence in the world and the fact that the individual is indeed a separate entity from the world but not isolated from the world. It is thus that if we state 'I think' then we are simply expressing our awareness of our very own consciousness.

The very conception of the 'I' itself is unadulterated by any outside experience for Kant. In other words the only understanding I can have of myself is through my own self-consciousness. "Consciousness is, indeed, that which alone makes all representations to be thoughts, and in it, therefore, as the transcendental subject, all our perceptions must be found; but beyond this logical meaning of the 'I', we have no knowledge of the subject itself"(334). The conception of the thinking subject for Kant is one of inner awareness that is not a mixture of perception and experience. We can also understand that Kant puts forth the argument that the only knowledge of our-self is indeed the knowledge that we have knowledge of our consciousness of the self. All of our perceptions stem from our consciousness and thus our own thinking comes from our inner awareness of the self. This conception is not without its own share of problems. Kant agrees that If we are to say that the subject is that which understands itself independently of experience then we seem to be buying into a private world of

understanding that does not seem to coincide with the actual life that one leads in the world. However we must proceed with this understanding of the ‘I think’ in order to follow Kant’ own argument.

Above we found that for consciousness all perceptions come from our own self-consciousness. Thus, we can infer that at some level that our consciousness provides a sense of unity. Certainly we cannot say that each thought is entirely independent of the next thought. Unity of thought in a thoroughly contemporary discourse would seem dependent on our own experience. The entire world’s intelligibility for one person would seem dependent entirely on one’s own experiences. How could you formulate any sort of political doctrine if you did not understand politics from some sort of vantage point, from your own experience? Even if your political project did not entail you changing your own countries system of politics but instead focused on simply understanding your own political beliefs more fully, then you would still rely on your past experiences within that political system. Any set of experiences would seem to engender some facet of who you were, your self. For Kant the relation between our own self and our experience does not stem from the act of experience at all. This conception presents us with a difficult concept that we must unpack in order to get a full understanding of what the subject is for Kant.

The main goal of Kant’s project is to understand what he calls the ‘*transcendental illusion*’. If we understand the basis for this project then this whole notion of the ‘I’ as the subject and the relation to experience will become more clear. The very notion of any transcendental subject presupposes that we look beyond our everyday experience in order to have any notion of such a subject. As Kant states “We are not here concerned with empirical (e.g. optical) illusion, which occurs in the empirical employment of rules of understanding that

are otherwise correct, and through which the faculty of judgment is misled by the influence of imagination”(298). The conception of the illusion always assumes that what appears to be real is in fact not. When applied to our ability to understand an illusion we find that a twofold subject arises; the general notion of illusion, and the type of illusion that Kant is concerned with.

First, at the most primitive level we are merely tricked into believing that something appears to be something different. The trick might involve our visual perspective or an auditory queue. Regardless of the sense that is being ‘tricked’ we know that the experience itself is not the experience of a real object. The experience is not real in the sense that you have been deceived into believing something that is blatantly false; that is once you understand that what you have just perceived was an illusion. Once you are aware that a ‘trick’ has been performed you indeed know that you have witnessed something that was not real. Now the second more deeply entrenched concept of illusion has to do with the very act of perceiving anything in the world. For Kant our empirical faculties are useful in making sense of the world around us. It is hardly plausible to say that Kant rejects the notion that we perceive the world through our empirical faculties. Empirical understanding cannot lead us anywhere in Kant’s attempt to put forth a rational psychology of the self. The very illusion that we understand is not the world itself but our own interpretation that is based on our imagination of the world.

The ‘transcendental illusion’ that Kant wants to expose does not involve the empirical understanding of the world at all. If we are to take Kant at face value on such a principle then we must understand that the principle of correct judgment ends up in a dire situation, if we are looking for a principle that is correct, that is to say not based of incorrect interpretations of the world.

“For truth or illusion is not in the object, in so far as it is intuited, but in the judgment about it, in so far as it is thought. It is therefore correct to say that the senses do not err- not

because they always judge rightly but because they do not judge at all. Truth and error, therefore, and consequently also illusion as leading to error, are only to be found in the judgment, *i.e.* only in the relation of the object to our understanding”(297).

We have quite a problem then in understanding what sort of illusion the transcendental illusion is. Here we have a principle set out for us that goes beyond the limits of empirical evaluation. Kant wants to understand this principle for the very reason that it goes beyond the world and its relation to our senses. As Kant has stated, we succumb to our imagination when we rely on judgment based upon our own senses. The most straightforward clarification available in regards to the ‘transcendental illusion’ is the following. All ‘empirical illusions’ stem from our perceptions of the world. The ‘transcendental illusion’ involves one’s perception of one’s self independent from one’s experience, even more so prior to one’s experience. Later on we shall see just how important this conception of apriori perception of the self is critical to Kant’s argument for the subject.

At this point we see that Kant’s project certainly has the air of attractiveness in that if he succeeds, he will achieve a new understanding of the self that goes beyond the understandings put forth previously to Kant. So far we have tried to understand what Kant’s project is. In addition we have attempted to put forth a basic level of understanding of the idea of our self-reflexive conception of ‘I’. We can claim that at some point our identity goes beyond the bounds of the empirical realm as we have already seen. Moreover, there is a certain understanding that the subject for Kant will be based on a sense of the transcendental subject. The subject can be understood in Kant’s terms as something transcendental, but I believe there is a much richer conception that we must examine in regards to the subject.

If we can claim that there is some sense of unity to our thought, then it would seem we are interested in combination of something to make a whole. In this case a whole identity, which

results in a definition of the subject. On the surface it would seem rather plausible to simply assert that our consciousness unites all of our activities and emotions into one collective therefore resulting in our own personhood. We are distinct in that no one person engages in the same activity while simultaneously having come from the identical past of other person, thus each person does not participate in an activity the way any other individual does. Our ability to make sense of our individual distinctions and our own experience, the very thing that seems quite problematic for Kant, would seem to be the central criteria for our identity as a self, a distinct individual. We must ask what sort of unity is Kant after then?

Again we must return to the phrase 'I think' in order to understand this concept of unity and perception before experience. In relation to the proposition 'I think' Kant states the following, "this proposition, however, is not itself an experience, but the form of apperception which belong to and precedes every experience; and as such it must always be taken only in relation to some possible knowledge, as a *merely subjective condition* of that knowledge"(337). Here we see that the reflexive notion of self-awareness comes previous to any experience. We must still ask is the proposition 'I think' central to our identity? For Kant at this point it seems we can say no it is not, however the proposition does point to two things of great importance. First, no matter what the proposition 'I think' does not stem from one's experiences. Even if the proposition does not give us a concept that is purely rational it certainly points out that all experience belongs to empirical psychology and not rational psychology. Second, we find that the proposition is a "*merely subjective condition*" of knowledge. "For we are not in a position to represent such being to ourselves save by putting ourselves, with the formula of our consciousness, in the place every other intelligent being"(337). We cannot put forward the argument that the proposition 'I think' provides us with a universal declaration of what we our as

individuals, in other words who we are as individual conscious beings. What we can say is that some aspect of our being does involve the recognition of one's self through the declaration 'I think', moreover this is a rational principle, since this principle precedes one's experience.

For Kant the conception of inner awareness can also be called self-consciousness. We are aware of our own inner sense of the world, additionally as we have stated above this is our own subjective consciousness that does not provide a universal knowledge of who we are. By stating that this knowledge is not universal I mean to say that the knowledge only exists as a condition of knowing ourselves through our self not by presupposing any category of self beyond our own awareness. We are simply recognizing some entity that we can call our-self through self-consciousness. We have to at this point relate self-consciousness to the idea of 'I' as our soul. Once we can make sense of the soul in Kant's argument we can return to the qualities inherent in self-consciousness and thus have a firmer grasp on what the subject is for Kant.

In order to understand the ontology that Kant puts forth we must understand exactly how the soul relates to the principle of the self. As we have already seen Kant is keenly aware of self-awareness. Indeed this very concept of self-consciousness is dependent on the conception of one's own awareness of one's own being. But we have said very little about the idea of being in relation to the self. We must note that common notions of the 'soul' and its existence are almost always attacked with great viciousness in the contemporary discourse. Kant's quest for certainty in relation to the subject treats the soul not as theoretical object of hypothesis. Instead Kant quite readily admits that the soul itself is quite real.

On the surface the soul is substance and has three relation qualities. These qualities being that the soul "as regards its quality it is simple"(330). In this sense the soul is not a complex arrangement of different qualities it is simply the soul as a soul nothing more. The soul "as

regards the different times in which it exists, it is numerically identical, that is, *unity* (not plurality)”(330). We are one soul that does not change through time. When I go to sleep even though I am not conscious of my being in the same sense that I am when I am awake my soul is the same when I wake up. I do not cease to be myself in sleep and then awake to a new self. Lastly the soul “is in relation to possible objects in space”(331). This last point is crucial in our understanding of the subject for Kant. This relation that we have to possible objects in space points towards a very contemporary discussion of the self and the world. Of course one could simply state that by possible objects Kant is not interested in objects of lunacy or the imagination. Pay careful note here though, notice that if we have a relation to possible objects then it seems that Kant is interested in what exists for us in our world. Only that which inhabits the space of our own lives and the meaning of those objects in our own space is possible. Thus, the world is intelligible to us as a relation of what is possible in our lives and what is meaningful to us. This points towards the idea of the apperception of experience for one’s self. At this point we see that the soul for Kant makes the world intelligible to us and in doing so the soul can best be known as the very “substance of our inner sense”(331).

I have been saying over and over again that there is a sense of unity that Kant is concerned with and I have not fully explained up till now why this conception of unity is important. The best sense of unity that seems to stem from Kant’s argument concerns the notion of temporality in Kant’s argument.

“I refer each and all my successive determinations to the numerically identical self, and do so throughout time, that is, in the form of the inner intuition of myself. This being so, the personality of the soul has to be regarded not as inferred but as a completely identical proposition of self-consciousness in time; and this indeed, is why it is valid *a priori*”(341).

As we look at inward towards our-self each time, we do so in relation to the world, which is a changing world. On any level, today is not the same as yesterday, and the relation we have to anything is always changing. Yet, the relation we have to our-self does not change. According to Kant one reason for this is that we do not consider experience as an essential component to who we are. Recall that we understand our-self prior to experience. Our inner awareness does not change throughout time we always know our self as our very own individual self. The very unity of our own personhood is the sense of unity throughout time, our self-consciousness does not change even though are environment does.

We must note that the concept of the individual that relies solely on the unity of thought to provide knowledge of the self is deficient for Kant. So we cannot simply state that all we need to focus on is some sense of unity of one's thought. Kant himself argues, "The whole of rational psychology is involved in the collapse of its main support. Here as little as elsewhere can we hope to extend our knowledge through mere concepts- still less by means of the merely subjective form of all our concepts, consciousness- in the absence of any relation to possible experience"(341). At the end of the day we seem to have only scratched the surface of what the subject is not for Kant. Yet, we should not despair for there does seem to be a notion of the subject that is coming forth at this point. Notice that Kant again and again argues that our conception of the 'I' is not founded on principles of perception, or experience, and yet each utterance of 'I' presupposes that there is some central point that Kant refers to. What is even more shocking is that it would seem that the very project of rational psychology based on the idea of the soul as a substance that is simple and unified through time would not provide the answer to what we can know through reason. "Thus the whole of rational psychology, as a science surpassing all powers of human reason, proves abortive, and nothing is left for us but to

study our soul under the guidance of experience”(353). I believe we can conceive of this central point of experience as inner awareness, and not our everyday dealings with the world. What we must take from the above arguments is the conception of inner awareness as a fundamental principle of who we are and how we relate and understand the world. The conception of inner awareness will lead us forward to understanding Kant’s argument for the subject.

We can understand that the subject for Kant revolves around the conception of self-consciousness. The underpinnings of all awareness certainly seem to stem from our awareness of ourselves. We recognize that we are each individual and exist as our very own beings.

“Self consciousness in general is therefore the representation of that which is the condition of all unity, and itself is unconditioned. We can thus say of the thinking ‘I’ (the soul) which regards itself as substance, as simple, as numerically identical at all times, and as the correlate of all existence, from which all other existence must be inferred, that it does *not* know *itself though the categories*, but knows the categories and through them all objects in the absolute unity of apperception and so *through itself*”(365).

This version of the self certainly seems to be the most plausible assertion of what the subject is for Kant. The representation of the self is the very notion of understanding that we our indeed ourselves and we are aware of this. All experience exists in so far as that our inner awareness allows us to experience. Our own inner awareness is responsible for making the categories of existence intelligible. Without our self-consciousness there is no world. Kant’s argument hinges on the principle that we can make no sense of the world independent of our own consciousness. All inner awareness precedes all experience and as such is the primary component of the subject.

Moreover the subject is the active ‘I’. The ability to understand you as a thinking subject coincides with our self-consciousness. “The proposition, “I think”, in so far as it amounts to the assertion, ‘*I exist thinking*’, is no mere logical function but determines the subject (which is then at the same time object) in respect of existence, and cannot take place without inner sense, the

intuition of which presents the object not as thing in itself but merely as appearance”(382). Here we see the culmination of Kant’s thought that is a departure from the modern discourse on the philosophy of self. The subject-object distinction is no longer a distinction at all. For Kant the subject and the object are one and the same. The world that we understand is in very many ways our own world, in that our inner sense is what gives rise to the world. Indeed there can be no argument that there would not be a world had I not existed. What there would not be is my very own person. The world could not unfold around my inner awareness if my inner awareness was not there to make sense of the world.

I would argue that this point put forth by Kant is the foundation for the contemporary discourse on the philosophy of self. The act of self-reflexive thinking is just that, an act. This act produces the conditions that are necessary for one’s understanding of one’s self. As we have seen in Kant’s argument, one understands one self through one’s inner awareness of the self. The very act itself is the reflection of who we are. As a subject that has no distinction from an object we as thinking beings propagate the world’s intelligibility through our very own person. In some sense I believe we can say that the self presents the limits of understanding. What is the limit of understanding?

The concept of experience that is put forth by Kant goes as follows. Experience is not responsible for the self as a soul as substance. Experience comes to the fore of understanding through the inner awareness manifest in our own person. The act of thinking itself presupposes the field of intelligibility that allows one to experience anything at all. We understand the world from our own perspective, and cannot transcend our very own self in order to understand the world in any other fashion. As we experience consciousness, our inner awareness in Kant’s terms, we understand the world in limited terms. The entire world is not available to us for our

understanding. The very act of experience itself only comes from my being present in some sense. Without my presence, my understanding is non-existent, in that as a self-conscious being I must be aware of my thinking in order to understand the world. The best way to describe the limit of understanding is found in my relation to the limited intelligibility of the world that is available to me.

I want to turn towards the early work of Wittgenstein in order to understand the previous argument in terms of the contemporary discourse of the philosophy of self. The above argument that goes towards the limit of understanding is not a concrete prescription for how we interpret the world. However, I do want to say that the basic thrust of the argument points towards a promising conception that provides the movement towards a fuller understanding of the subject-self quandary. The concept of limit appears quite prevalent within the early work of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. Of course this early thought does not accompany all of Wittgenstein's thought throughout his life. In fact he quite readily subscribes to different conceptions of the self later on. Yet, the very idea of some limit to the self as subject and to our very own understanding of the world certainly appears to stem from the earlier work of Kant. It is this transitional concept that I want to turn our attention to.

We have talked at great length about the conception of inner awareness as the fundamental conception of the self. Additionally we have seen that the act of thinking is an act of understanding that we our self-conscious and thus we are our own self. Where Kant and Wittgenstein appear to meet is on the conception of the world and the limitation of the subject-object relation. "That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of my world"(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 151). Understanding of the world is limited to one's self. The

ability to comprehend the world is based upon the limits set forth by one's understanding of the world. How very important the self as become through the doctrine of Kant. The subject as thinking self-conscious being is the responsible factor in limiting the understanding of the world. The new concept that we have not dealt with up to this point is language. Language appears to be a limiting factor to Wittgenstein's argument about the self and world. Yet we still have the concept of limit intact. Even more so the limit of language is a limit that comes from the self. The self in this case cannot understand the world outside of the self's language. But regardless of language or experience the self is prior to both.

The most Kantian moment in Wittgenstein appears to be the declaration that "The world and life are one. I am my World"(151). Here again we have this philosophical moment where the world and the self are inseparable. Moreover my entire being is the basis for my existence and understanding of the world. Outside of me there is no world that I understand and so in this sense the world and myself are one. I have possession of the world in myself. Not so much in the sense of property ownership, more in the sense that my understanding of the world is so and the world is mine. In a very similar manner Kant declared that the self presupposes experience, and thus the world can only come to the fore through the individual's conception of ones self.

The other notion that I believe is quite Kantian in Wittgenstein is the notion of the limit of the subject in relation to the world. "The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world"(151). Notice here that we have said that we have possession of the world, whether it is a contrivance or not we must boldly state that the world does not have possession of us. The world is not a subject that creates gives forth meaning; those meanings come from our understanding and our understanding alone. This is not to say that the world does not provide stimulus and response to our understanding it is simply that our own self provides a limit to the

world. For Kant and for Wittgenstein the world can only be understood in limited terms of the self. At the heart of each argument the self is central to the concerns of each author. The conception each author has in regards to the self revolves around a declaration of an identity based upon awareness of the self. In turn the world comes to be for the self because the self exists as a thinking subject indistinguishable from the object, because for Kant and Wittgenstein there is no distinction!

I readily admit that Kant's notion of the subject is a bit dense and illusory at the same time. What we can discern and make sense of in Kant's argument is the concept of inner awareness. Inner awareness of the self as a conscious being gives rise to the conditions necessary for experience. The inner awareness itself is the reflection of the self, even though we cannot have knowledge of the self beyond this. The contemporary projects are indebted to Kant in that the conception of the apriori conditioning responsible for the intelligibility of experience comes from the self for Kant. As we have seen briefly in Wittgenstein the limit of the notion of the self informs the contemporary debate by positing a limit to the extent of knowledge about the self and the world. It is a rather funny that Kant's project to determine a universal rational psychology ends up with a limited yet very appealing sense of what we are as the subject.