

SYMPOSIUM

Précis of *The Practical Self*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

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Abstract

We are self-conscious creatures thrown into a world, which is not of our making. What is the connection between being self-conscious and being related to an objective world? *The Practical Self* argues that self-consciousness requires faith in ourselves as the agents of our thinking and that this faith is sustained by a set of practices which relate us to a world of others.

Keywords: Kant; Descartes; self-consciousness; objectivity; self-knowledge; thinking; agency; faith; mental action; Lichtenberg

We are self-conscious creatures thrown into a world which is not of our making. What is the connection between being self-conscious and being related to an objective world? Descartes and Kant, in different ways and with different emphases, argued that self-conscious subjects must be related to an objective world. Philosophers in the twentieth century admired their nerve but lacked their ambition: self-conscious subjects, they argued, must only think or experience the world as objective. These retreats can feel unsatisfying to those who share the ambitions of the Cartesian and Kantian projects. However, even on their own terms, they betray a striking confidence about the immutability of our perspective on the world. Why think that our ways of thinking and experiencing the world are any less subject to historical contingencies than our ways of speaking and dressing? It is no easier to show that self-conscious subjects must think or experience an objective world than it is to show that they must be genuinely related to one.

One response to the failure of these projects is to reject their starting point as a relic of outdated philosophical thinking. We hamstring our intellectual inquiry, one might think, in abjuring the knowledge, understanding, and insight occasioned by empirical investigation into the nature of human beings. At the tail end of the eighteenth century, the philosopher, physicist, and aphorist George Christoph Lichtenberg makes the opposing complaint. It is not that Descartes goes too far into isolation. He does not go far enough. For the starting point of the Cartesian meditations involves claims to which he is not entitled. “One should say *it is thinking*, just as one says, *it is lightning*,” he writes, “To say cogito is already too much as soon as one translates it as *I am thinking*. To assume the I, to postulate it, is a practical requirement.”

Lichtenberg’s remarks were enormously influential on those who read them—Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, the logical positivists, Wittgenstein, Freud: all drew insightfully on Lichtenberg’s comments when reflecting on the nature and character of self-conscious thought. But the aphoristic passage is easily misunderstood. It is not concerned with the possibility of subjectless episodes of thinking, with Descartes’s grounds for recognizing a subject of thinking above and beyond the episode of thinking itself. Rather, it is concerned with our entitlement to think of ourselves as the

agent of our thinking. Sometimes thoughts strike us like lightning. When this happens, we are their patient. It is central to our self-conscious lives that this is the exception: we are first and foremost the agents of our thinking. Lichtenberg's puzzle is to explain our right to think of ourselves as such.

This puzzle has surprising force. The self-conscious thinking undertaken in isolation is an agential activity: giving and withdrawing assent is something we do. And neither experience nor conceptual mastery nor the machinery of Kant's transcendental philosophy put us in a position to know that we are the agents of our thinking. Lichtenberg's alternative is that to assume the I, to postulate it, is a practical requirement. Making sense of this suggestion requires us to draw a distinction between two different ways in which we can take a stand on things. One is theoretical, of the sort involved in believing that things are thus and so. The other is a distinctive sort of practical assent which Kant sometimes calls *faith*. We have practical grounds for accepting that we are the agents of our thinking. Self-consciousness requires faith in ourselves as the agents of our thinking.

This helps with the Cartesian and Kantian projects because faith can be undermined and it can be sustained. Iris Murdoch, in the final part of her maddening and bewitching *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, draws attention to the beliefs, experiences, practices, and rituals which religion once provided for us and which she thinks need to be co-opted to support our search for the good. Similarly, our faith in ourselves as the agents of our thinking can be and is sustained by beliefs, experiences, and practices which relate us to the world. Prime among them are the practices involved in holding and being held accountable for one's judgments—practices which are part of what P.F. Strawson once characterized as the *participatory stance*. To hold someone accountable for their judgment is take that judgment to be imputable to them. It is to take them as the agent of their thinking. The practice of criticizing and cavilling thus provides us with a framework with which to sustain the idea that we are the agents of our thinking.

And this provides us with a connection to the world. For our faith in ourselves as the agents of our thinking is sustained by practices which relate us to other thinkers. We are thus *practical selves*: intellectual agents who have distinctively practical grounds to recognize ourselves as such. And our faith in ourselves as practical selves is sustained through interaction with others. The argument of *The Practical Self* is that self-consciousness requires faith in ourselves as the agents of our thinking and that this faith is sustained by a practices which relate us to other thinkers. Self-consciousness connects us to a world of other people, talking, arguing, and holding one another to account.¹

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¹This précis is a lightly amended and abridged version of the Introduction to *The Practical Self*.