The Framework of Subjectivity as Object of Consciousness in the Question of Personal Duties and Rights

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Abstract

Philosophy, in general terms, perceives the human being as both the subject and the object of cognitive processes. As subject, acknowledging the existence of subjectivity is a prerequisite for establishing a conceptual framework, a sort of pragmatic guide to the perceived phenomena we conceptualize as "reality". The requisite first step is the recognition of the human being as an entity with a capacity for perceiving and analyzing external physical phenomena. As the object of this cognitive process, philosophers also acknowledge the existence of an autonomous, separate nature in human beings. A normative system of structures and categories serves to describe the process of perception, rendered as a current that flows from within only to return as a frame of reference for the internal morphology of the self. So, from a critical standpoint, only subjectivity can provide diagnostic potential to the theoretical framework that allows us to describe reality. Consequently, the quest to answer the question of human nature and its station within reality can only be embarked upon subjectively. The ensuing inquiry, then, needs to revolve around whether the self has an inherent, autonomous nature, independent of its material environment. Can such a thing as an autonomous self even exist? Such a discussion marshals the issue inevitably towards a debate on praxis: has the binary formed by the exclusionary terms "nature" (the external world) and "subjectivity" (the internal world of the thinking being) been the only available tool to describe the *one* reality that conflates both concepts, that of the self? Has the codicillary nature of language frustrated our efforts in this regard? The long and arduous struggle with this complex issue bespeaks the effort to align its multifaceted components in order to attempt a pragmatic interpretation of the self and its existence. This article will focus on that effort.

Keywords: the self, self-consciousness, Richard Rorty, duty, rights, language

Creating the "Self" by Creating *in* Language

Wise men in Ancient Greece inaugurated philosophical thought with questions about the universe, the absolute cause of reality and the nature of the human being. Rhetorical questions such as, "who am I; where did I come from; what is the cause of the universe?" represented the first steps taken by humankind to overcome the mysteries and inadequacies of myth and generate the analytical tools required to speak of these subjects in a standardized and rational manner. Moreover, they were also attempting to establish the criteria for assembling a theoretical context for "the self," one in which human beings, as "the knowing subject" (Rorty, 1979, p. 9), created meaning from the vantage point of their subjective acumen. Evident from the start was the fact that the world is not what it is as a result of human beings' representations of it, that is to say, it was intuited that reality existed independently of our capacity to perceive and represent it.

Religions, philosophies and the natural sciences have endeavored to grasp the fundamental nature of the world, including human nature, by constantly fashioning apposite language systems. After every significant revolution in philosophy or science, revolutions that provide us with newfangled vocabularies, we are inclined to suppose that mankind is taking another step toward unveiling the fundamental nature of reality. This is because people generally suppose that the nature of the world/reality already exists in many layers and that our mission (in the thinking process) is to "get through" those layers step by step by using an increasing number of explanations and descriptions that will allow us to reach that "true" nature. However, I'd postulate here that, because we use language as our indispensable tool for these endeavors, we only expand our understanding of the different, various, and contingent *appearances* of reality (that is, of the way it appears to the human subject), an effort that does not allow us to "reach its true nature" because reality – the world – has no "nature". That word is a simple presupposition from our standpoint that injects a semblance of meaning to the world. Science, or the way we try to explain the world/reality "in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Nielsen, 2006, p. 128) is the way we analyze *our* descriptions of the world/reality. Yet what we often take as a significant discovery regarding an external object is in actuality activated and sustained by something that resides in the structures and organization of our minds; such discoveries might have gained common currency because the strict rules under which the experience of that object is even conceivable exist in our *selves* a priori. It is the description of *our* story, the understanding of *our* language, the discovery of *us*, "the knowing subject" that is so often performed and described as "science". As Karl Popper has pointed out: "The history of science, like the history of all human ideas, is a history of irresponsible dreams, of obstinacy, and of error" (n.p.). Subjectivity reigns: In the social arena, this kind of thinking can be rendered as a set of questions about ethical and political issues, such as "what is good?; what is bad?; what are the duties of a citizen? Can these questions even receive a relatively objective answer? If your answer is "yes", your understanding is based on the Platonic idea that the nature of things already exists and that our mission is just to discover or "reach" it.

Richard Rorty disagreed with the Platonic perspective. For him, the world does not have any "meaning." The world exists for itself and by itself only. Before and after human existence, the world was and will remain as it is. Thus, when we talk about the "truth" or "nature of the world," we are diving into a debate that revolves around language systems and the subjective views of human beings. Popper insists:

> Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but the descriptions of the world are not. Only the descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot. (n.p.)

We explain the world via our language systems and create its meaning through our worldviews. Cognition of objects such as a rock by a river presupposes a subjective set of values that depend on systems of human awareness and the conditions under which one experiences the rock, as Kant (*Prolegomena,* para. 17) would have it. This rock by the river does not have any meaning or any ultimate cause: it is just a rock on the riverbank, a small part of the world with its variety and contingency. We, the "knowing subject," look at that rock and ask questions about its presence, such as, "where does it come from; what does it look like; and for what tasks can we employ it?" A romantic writer may compose a poem about how this rock's sadness is a relevant metaphor for his or her lonely life. In this sense, we do not discover the "nature" of the world/reality, but rather "create" our "self" via the way in which we explain reality. At times our perception of reality is altered, as in the case where the moon is low on the horizon and we see it as being farther from us than when it is high in the sky. The "reality" is that it is the same size, but for some as yet unspecified reason our minds "bend" reality in order to satisfy some subjective need to alter its dimension.

The way we make meaning of the world is one of the three elements that are referred to here as the *practical elements* that create "the self"; the other two are the *physical* and the *cognitive elements.*

The denotation of the concept "the self" is more definitive than the concept "human". We can understand a human as "a member of the primate genus Homo, especially a member of the species Homo sapiens, distinguished from other apes by a large brain and the capacity for speech." (The Free Dictionary by Farlex, n.d.)

The *self* is not as vague as all that. It refers to a specific person who was born and grew up in a particular social context and identifies his/her characteristics within concrete parameters that are inherent to particular circumstances. Therefore, "the self" is the product of the individual's interfaces with reality and its complex social relations. In this sense, "the self" is not a purely free and unconcerned object. The development, contours and manifestations of "the self" come from reality and are affected by the specific reality in which it is formed. "The self" understands reality via its language and its particular vocabulary. This particular language and its symbolic meaning-conveying structures do not belong to reality in itself. It is one of the various modes used by the "knowing subject" to describe reality and represent existence. Therefore, human language presupposes the intrusion of subjectivity and personality into the description; it also depends on the historical circumstances within which that particular language was formed. For instance, it would not be possible to explain accurately the United States' presidential election, with its vocabulary of words such as "democratic", "freedom", "Constitution", "the tyranny of the majority", "electoral college", "senators", and so on. to a person who lived in the Middle Ages. The difference in the way of *thinking* and the manner of forming judgment is the result of the dissimilarity in language systems formed in very different historical and social circumstances.

The Question of the "I" as the Object of Self-Consciousness

The question of human nature has been one of the paramount critical issues in philosophy from ancient to modern and postmodern times. Different philosophical responses do not entirely answer that question, but rather suggest new interpretations and a return to that same question from different critical perspectives. Beyond that fundamental question lies a series of ancillary questions, such as: What is human nature? How can we understand it? and even the more radical inquiry: Is there something called nature?

Questions sometimes contain answers. When we ask, "Who am I?" or "What is human nature?" we have to assume that there is an "I" or a "human nature" that actually exists. It is the same conundrum pointed out by Parmenides, who declares that once we ask the question "What is nothingness?" we have already assumed its existence, we have reached a consensus that something called "nothingness" exists, and we are actively involved in the search for it. Consequently, as a result of our query, the foremost property of "nothingness" is no longer "nothingness". So this begs the question: does the "I" exist before I enquire about its nature? This question of the "I" is not about the "I" as subject. The "I" becomes an object about which "I" am asking a question. Thus, there is an obvious critical line drawn between a speciously pre-existing "I" (object) and the "I" (subject) who raises the question about it. So, derived from this fundamental understanding, terms such as "self", "subject" and "consciousness" are constructed to rationally explain the existence, intuitively obvious, of the "I."

Heidegger, who has considerable influence on Rorty, avoids using these words because he considers that they misrepresent phenomenal reality; they imply that we are always aware of ourselves, that we ourselves are an object of reality, and that we are fully aware of objects. Along with them, the words "soul" or "spirit" are just one more aspect or stage of a human being. Moreover, as soon as the human being was defined as a rational animal (ζῷον λόγος ἔχων – zoon logon echon) in the construal of ancient Greek philosophers, "reason" and "rationality" were attributed to humans as intrinsic characteristics that distinguish us from other objects. So it follows that the discovery of absolute reason is the way to uncover human nature and identity. Nietzsche and Heidegger further argue that reason may be purely theoretical and that human behavior and its associated cognitive strategies are governed and significantly conditioned by non-reasoning dynamics. So it follows that human nature depends on a "relationship with being" and not solely or even primarily on reason.

The answer to the questions "what is human?" and "what is human nature?" begins with an initial recognition of the existence of human nature. That recognition inevitably leads to different trends in the interpretation of human nature. Human nature, according to recognized critical tendencies, is the reflection of the fixed, immutable existence in humans, one that admits that there is also an insensate external reality that is independent of human subjective consciousness. The nature of reality is traceable by trailing the physiognomy of human nature, given that human nature is a small universe that replicates and reflects the universe (as a whole). Modern philosophers (or as Rorty calls them, the "Platonic-Kantian philosophers") have pushed the human "self" outside the scope of its individualized existence toward the realm of the object. Overcoming the limited scope of the individual in order to properly identify the nature of reality is a process whereby an individual must liberate its "self" in order to redeem the self that exists as "the true self", that is to say, a self that belongs to reality and is not a distinct, separate entity. This process will be finished when that "self" returns to itself and defines itself as the authentic image of a broader reality.

In that process, reason acts as a starting point and referential frame for determining whether the search for the nature of reality is right or wrong and whether the proposed answer to the question of human nature is convincing or not.

Similarly, when we ask the question "Who am I?", the first step is to admit that there is such a thing as an "I" that antedates my query, so it follows that we can ask questions about it. However, the "I" cannot adequately answer the question of its existence without tackling the tricky question of what caused it: "Why is there an 'I' in the first place?" That inevitably leads to the second question: "Where does the 'I' come from?" So, if we replace the word "I" with the words "human nature," we must admit that the interpretation of the nature of reality is the quest for the answer to the first question.

In other words, we can understand the "I" as "a thing" that does not exist outside of our justifications for the "I". When we say the "I" as an available presupposition, it is thought to be available "before" our justifications for the "I." However, the "I" is completely meaningless outside of its narratives. The "I" is both independent of and dependent on subjective explanations. So, it would be more convincing if we focused on the notions of "self" instead of "I." The "self" is understood as the place of concentration of will, emotion, and self-evaluation. The "I-self" is the self-concept of the knowing subject.

However, the "I-self" does not stand independently if it lacks a sense of self-concept. This sense comes from two sources: first, the "I-self" perceives its value system through a "mirror image" of itself. Moreover, the "Me-self" is a copy of the "I-self" on the object; the "I-self" separates itself and observes, evaluates itself as an object outside itself.

The process of the "I-self" separating itself in order to understand the self-concept concerning the "Me-self" will form "subjectivity." "Subjectivity" can be felt like a relatively independent object. It is the sum of the perceptions, evaluations, and characteristics of the "I-self" and its relationship with others. In a conversation, understood as a space for expression, subjectivity is defined as the set of behavioral patterns, interactions that are influenced by personal emotions, attitudes, and perceptions.

"Subjectivity" can be interpreted through characteristics:

- of judgment, based primarily on emotional impressions and personal views rather than external reality.
- of one's perceptions, views, feelings, beliefs, and desires. It is often used to denote personal views, as opposed to knowledge and beliefs based on reality.
- of events that happen in the mind and are governed by personal prejudices.
- that belong to the knowing subject concerning the object.
- that come into existence and exist in the mind of the knowing subject and are not necessarily compatible with any object outside of the mind.

To determine human nature and the nature of reality is to answer the question of the knowing subject as well as to answer questions about the object with which the subject is interacting. Of course, if the answer to the questions "Who am I?" and "What is my essence?" is not forthcoming, the cognitive subject will not be able to advance to the next step, which is to explain the object (of reality) because it is not possible to answer the question of the object when we cannot determine the answer to the more fundamental question of who we are. When we interpret an object of reality, we assume that the object exists and that it has a

nature that will be subjected to our interpretation, that is, to the criteria of elucidation that is dependent upon our subjective gaze. If the "I" does not "know who I am," in the process of perceiving the object, there can be no coherent explanation for the object. The central assessment centers around the question "what does the object's existence mean to the self?" Heidegger is very interested in this fundamental question:

> Does the table that I think I see before me exist? Does God exist? Does mind, conceived as an entity distinct from body, exist? These questions have the following form: does x (where $x =$ some particular kind of thing) exist? Questions of this form presuppose that we already know what "to exist" means. We typically don"t even notice this presupposition. But Heidegger does, which is why he raises the more fundamental question: what does "to exist" *mean*? This is one way of asking what Heidegger calls the question of the meaning of Being. (Wheeler, 2018)

However, this leads to the another question, which in substance is a revised version of the initial question: If we recognize that there are two such things as human nature and a nature of reality, then the question is: are they invariable, fixed for us to find, or are they unpredictable and contingent?

This framework leads to the next conflict, based on the question of the self and human nature. It may be illustrated thus: if we affirm the contingency and variability of the self, it means that we indirectly admit that "there is a possible existence of contingency and variability as a characteristic of the identity of the self", and the identification and interpretation of that contingency will also be the process whereby we affirm that "there is an identity that already existed in each object." Therefore, whether affirming or negating the existence of an existing identity, the process of argument would lead us back to the starting point. So, are we making ourselves difficult?

Let's get back to the way Wittgenstein commented on the language game because the way we pose the question on the self is merely a language game, a game only meaningful to human beings. We are accustomed to having differences and distinguishing between different things in the world as well as in thought. On the contrary, with Wittgenstein there are no such rigid relationships. Games are born, played, ended, forgotten, and new games emerge. Their common ground is the materials of life. Rather than reestablishing the order of concepts and events, Wittgenstein sets out another principle: the continuous regeneration of new structures in the world as well as in thought. These structures define neither the world nor thinking in a lasting way but are only valid for every slice of life and every aspect of thought. Here, there is no standard rule that only cases can be specified in specific contexts. The cases that appear in practice show commonality, as, for example, games that have a particular "topic". There are countless different types of things called "symbols", "words", "sentences", and so on. This manifold is not something fixed, brought back once but a series of typical cases that are classified as "topics": for example, order/follow orders; describe or measure an object; create an object based on the description; report a happening.

Thus, language game rules have a new look: they guide the game, but only in the game itself, in the "transformation" of reality, and this "transformation" responds to rules, content and cogency. A concept system is formed as a "thinking cage" of the subject to "capture" the objects. The structure and content of this system are the foundations and rules that the subject takes as the fulcrum to initiate the cognitive process. However, once the subject starts to take

this system to "capture" the objects, he/she cuts things out of the flow of time and space and separates them in his/her cognitive range. At this moment, the language game begins in a particular dimension with "he/she" acting as the subject, the things or events as the object, all dependent on a concept system that acts as a cognitive tool and a way to identify the subject itself.

How Does the Term *Subjectivity* Answer the Question of Duty and Rights?

In 1957, the Soviet spy Rudolph Abel was arrested in New York City. He was sentenced to 30 years in prison for violating US security. Attorney James B. Donovan, the defense counsel for Abel, was pressured by public opinion as well as by his colleagues. The polarization and hatred between the capitalist and communist ideologies in the Cold War posed for Donovan a self-question: Who am I?; Who is Abel?, and What is my duty? That is also the question that his colleagues asked him: Why did you help a spy, an enemy of America? Donovan's answer that day was not only valuable in the context of that dialogue but also useful for philosophical interpretations: "I do not care if he is a spy or not. However, I am a lawyer, and Abel is my client. And with a democratic judiciary, he must be judged fairly". That is to say, Donovan did not define Abel as an abstract entity. He also did not seek the common, fundamental answer to the question "Who is Abel?" As a cognitive subject, Donovan cut Abel out of the flow of space and time, and "captured" Abel by using his concept system.

Donovan "planned" to define Abel as a subject in his narrative, not in other people's. Thereby, Donovan defined himself. Abel could be a hero from the perspective of the Soviet government, and the enemy from the perspective of the American public. However, from Donovan's reference system in that space-time slice, Abel is his client, and Donovan is a lawyer.

The question "Who is Abel?" is similar to the question "What is human nature?" The answer cannot come only once and be similar in all cases. The content and meaning of the question depend on the person who poses the question.

However, this interpretation is the beginning of a series of other questions. If Donovan planned Abel as a client to whom he was responsible under a fair and unbiased justice system, what was the foundation (in other words, starting point) for Donovan to build a "thinking cage" (a concept system) to "capture" the object "Abel"? What is the "bridge" between Donovan's and Abel's value system? How do these two values find correspondences? And if Donovan expects Abel to be treated fairly, then the objective that Donovan is pursuing is the outcome of an impartial trial grounded upon the foundations of a just society built on a transparent judiciary… or is it Donovan's personal need to pursue his own values?

Patricia Rohrer analyzes Richard Rorty's ideas on the purpose of individual action and community action in "*Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*". Rohrer praises Rorty for extending the purpose of human behavior not only to the satisfaction of material interests. She also agrees with Rorty that the confrontation between the goal of the community (towards justice) and the purpose of the self-creation (towards personal happiness) will be resolved in a common value system of meaning and human dignity.

Self-creation is based on two essential prerequisites: first, the individual must be aware that there is no solid, unchanged foundation upon which to build a correct reference; second, the individual must be free to choose his or her identity without fear of harm from the

community's value system. That is, individuals are free to construct a value network to pursue their own meaning based on the contingency of events experienced by the individual as well as by personal experiences that can only be felt personally.

Rohrer, however, argues that the value of an individual would be meaningless if there were no moral connection with those external systems of reference.

> […] selfhood only makes sense in terms of an orientation to a larger moral framework. I want to argue that the most promising way to educationally nourish a passionate commitment to democratic citizenship (the precursor to liberal irony) or to anything outside of narrow self-interest, is to allow passion as an existential question to take root in an exploration of Rorty's identity question. "Who are we?" must be substantively connected not only to "Who am I?" but to "What gives my life direction or meaning? (Rohrer, 2000, p. 57)

Based on Charles Taylor's view of the identity of the self, Rohrer points out the contradiction in Rorty's interpretation of the relationship between individual and community values. In the face of many different choices, the individual is free to select the tendency of action and justification that is appropriate for the purpose he/she is pursuing, so long as it is not detrimental to others. That is, whether he or she wants to or not, that individual must release him/herself from the realm of self-value that interferes with the value of others in order to create a dialogue.

At this moment, the "I-self" no longer sees itself in others, but others have "penetrated" into the "I-self." The "I-self" has corrupted itself concerning others. That is, the individual is no longer free to choose his or her tendency, but that choice depends on how the "I-self" frameworks itself in a wider dimension. Moreover, individuals cannot plan a network of values and meanings for themselves without general premises. These preconditions, the "knowledge platform", will define the characteristics of the "thinking cage" and the network of values and meanings that individuals are creating.

Returning to the example of the Abel case, at first glance we may assume that Donovan is pursuing his personal values without being affected by the external environment, and that he had planned to target Abel in a specific space-time context so that his defense of Abel acquired a meaningful sense for *himself*. However, without a social foundation with its structural, systemic, and historical preconditions, Donovan could not implement his cognition and planning process. That is, the immediate presence of a universal value system buttressed by democracy, justice, truth, human rights and human dignity that has been assembled and justified by reason is a mandatory reference for Donovan's "free choice". In short, Donovan's personal values are not immune to the general standard of the community.

From the perspective of the community, the pursuit of personal value comes from the community's foundations and reflects a universal value system. From the perspective of the individual, this process begins from the "I-self" releasing itself, evaluating and recognizing itself in the image of others, and returns to itself in the form of the "Me-self."

Conclusion

While most researchers treat individual duties and rights as fully definable concepts to be epitomized, understood, and assessed from a generally *a posteriori* standpoint, they should be

not understood as finalized and invariable notions. Specific contexts and variable relationships can frame contradictory understandings of these philosophical concepts. In a socio-historical system where value systems are diverse and constantly changing, the identification of personal dignity is not only important for forming an individual's creative activity; it is also beneficial for the development of legal systems in which the harmony between personal and community interests plays a key role in the sustainable development of society. This must come first and foremost from the awareness of the role of individuals in the community and the available workspace of individuals in that community. There is no general formula for the movement of social history; therefore, any assessment of an individual or national strategy policy must be based on a pragmatic and flexible framework.

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