

The self in Kantian reason; opposing the referential self in favor of the Nishidan reflexive (or religious) worldview

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The Kantian form of reason, following the self-critical procedure of the *Critique of Pure Reason*^a, most notably remains an issue of transcendence; one that has attracted criticism and reformulation from many who describe it as *too abstract*. That is, in seeking to understand or grasp some semblance of reason -itself (*bloße Vernunft*), Kant proposed we must search outside of the phenomenal world belonging to and arising from the senses; so as to endeavor those absolute, non experientially conditioned maxims of reason, its principles, and its products. To do so however one must work from within reason -itself: the inescapable, transcendental condition upon which all knowledge is - as a final stopping point - purportedly realized. An important outcome of this study of reason by reason was the Kantian claim that knowledge of self is an impossibility - floating in noumena - via an early, semantic notion of the *I* as mere contentless subject, transcendently designated. The *I*, using his logic of subject, lacks any direct affirmation (or negation) of *oneself*; acting as a mere indexical to synthesize determinate, particular conscious acts under one universal form of awareness. But before we proceed with exploring how this transcendental condition ultimately influences a philosophy of knowledge of the self - what Kant opposes at every turn, and only defends in terms of *self-consciousness* - it is important we understand what procedure *pure reason* follows in necessarily realizing our

knowledge. Thus, let us begin with illustrating (what I shall call) the Kantian procession of thoughtful attainment; starting from the very beginning: seeing, touching, hearing, etc.

All objects first encountered in the world via the senses are considered by Kant to be *appearances*, separate - only by means of their connectivity to reason and the understanding, and not necessarily in *quality*¹ - from the *things in themselves* (*das Ding an sich*) [a, A251]. Object-appearances are given through *intuition* (*Anschauung*) as singular representations of sensibility, which are then thought through the *understanding* (*Verstand*) via concepts. The thing in itself is often reformulated as illusory - ie., seemingly real but nonetheless impossible or contradictory - for it can only be posited by the power of reason -itself, and never truly encountered or grounded in experiential terms². Perhaps it would be better to explicate this in the following terms: what Kant calls *transcendental illusions* contain, aside from pure intuition, *judgments*³ that inadvertently re-orient our form of pure reasoning with fallacy. The key word here, for differentiating the reasonable and intuitable, are the grounds of judgments; for judgments that lead to illusion are - more often than not - entirely subjective [a, B350-352]. Subjective judgments are particular in nature, and thus derive from a particular subject's state of mind rather than proving something universally instantiable: ie., objective. Consider a common example, between that of sensible reality and dreams (ie., illusion). If I dream that I am in Hokkaido but am in fact on the other side of the world, upon waking from my dream I may for a

¹ By this we mean the *appearance* of an object and - what we later denote - the *illusion* of an object can be indistinguishable in quality; such as a lucid dream, where reality becomes mish-moshed with belief.

² Kant never implicitly makes this connection; but I do as such to demonstrate the similarity of their logical forms. Ie., in critiquing *metaphysics*, Kant seeks to show any 'experience of consciousness' not also grounded in intuitable experience cannot be meaningfully conceived: proven or disproved. The *dream* (an object of consciousness) and *god* (yet another) cannot be disclosed or disavowed objectively.

³ *Judgments* (*Urteil*) are specific forms of *cognition* (*Erkenntnis*) in which an object undergoes representation, usually through attribution of properties to said object; as the faculty which subsumes under the rules of the *understanding*. It - judgment - is contentless. *Cognition* is the determined relations of these representations to an object [a, A122/B172]

short while think myself there. However, there are several things (processes) that allow me to dispel this illusion of my own condition rather quickly. One, once I am up and out of bed, I can simply look from my window and reconsider my objective position. Two, I can deliberate via reason with another person - say, my roommate who occupies the same house - that we have not been magically transported overnight. Illusion is thus easy to avoid when one, in perfect unity, combines the sensible intuitions and practices of pure reason; although ironically it is from reason -itself these transcendental illusions arise and from their arising are ultimately considered necessary to reason [a, B354]. We shall not endeavor into this further. It is however important to take away from this talk of illusion that there is a critical difference, relayed by Kantian reason, between what is *knowable* and what is not. Appearances, because they are representations of phenomenal objects - and are hence attained by sensibility - are known; whereas *das Ding an sich* are a product of reason's own illusion and cannot be called knowable for they are noumenal. Returning to our above example - having reasoned through our current state of experience - allows us to claim *I have dreamed*; but not *the happenings of this dream were real*. Thus reason, as critiqued by reason -itself, becomes an activity of self-imposed limitation.

The knowable things (ie., the subjects of knowledge) are always grounded simultaneously in experience as derived from the senses, further explicated through the *understanding* and its consciousness of concepts, and lastly synthesized through reason's faculty which subsumes the whole of the understanding under maximizable principles applicable to all rational beings [a, A299]. Kant refers to this process of conscious synthesis as the *unity of apperception*, through which all knowledge is conditionally possible - on experiential grounds which keep us on soil as sensibly intuited, and the transcendental condition of reason to exceed the world via in-experientiable, conscious processes grounded in the concepts of understanding;

and their ultimate extension into the universal [a, A300]. What is alluded to here, far before any actual claims are made in favor of it, is the *categorical imperative*: the ethical opus and maxim of Kant's philosophical project into practical reason [b, 421-422]. As we have already mentioned through our conversation on illusion - and as is further explicated here - reason is very much based within its own limitations and possibilities. Kant makes a great effort to always posit this in an auspicious manner nonetheless. Granted our capacity of reason is now one of margins - one of boundaries and high walls that themselves do not reach heaven (ie., transcendence) - we would seem to be trapped in the phenomenal world. We would also seem to not be free, and more importantly - for our endeavor - it makes an explicit claim that knowledge of self (and further knowledge of knowledge -itself) is impossible.

Thus, we seem in need of something - at the very least - redemptive to our hopes and dreams which are now nothing but transcendental illusions; to our soul which is now fantasy, and to our gods which are nothing but principles confounded by reason's necessity of absoluteness [See a, *The paralogisms of pure reason*]. After all, the absolute stand point of reason in many ways restricts rather than implicitly exuding freedom to all, or delegating each of us to an equal faculty of reason - itself. However, I myself do not deny his proceeding claim; that without limitations a freedom would ironically not exist at all. Laws like gravity are, simultaneously, crushing and restrictive to the imagination; and yet fundamentally, without said laws, we would know nothing of what it is like to fly. The imagination -itself would be purposeless in a world of infiniteness; ie., one in which laws are null and we act autonomously as gods. It would be quite boring⁴ incidentally. We, I will reiterate, do not disagree here.

⁴ I am reminded here of the Japanese term *mukagen* (無下限), meaning *limitless* or more precisely *no lower limit of nothing*. Even nothingness, in this sense, is subject to limitation; an important thing to keep in mind for Kitarō Nishida's philosophy - that we will introduce later on.

What I and other philosophers disagree with on the other hand, in spite of this contention for freedom as self-binding, is the means by which limitation is imposed; through the Kantian form of reason and its - decisively - contentless existence, as something seemingly inactive. Consider this from the abstract terms imposed by the categorical imperative. Maxims which are universally instantiable fundamentally lack experiential grounds - a prominent member (claim) of almost all Western ethical theories - by means of their referential method of positing reason -itself. Ethics is always seen as something noumenal, abstract, and transcendent; with no claims to be asserted of its material and historical uprising. Once again, from the standpoint of the categorical imperative, consider the very formulating act of Kant's ethical argument whilst bearing in mind the historical circumstance of conception: the *Enlightenment*. Like all the rationalists inspired by the movement⁵, Kant voids any materialist notions from the categorical imperative by working only through abstract lines of reason - said to envelop all places and all times of rational beings; through allusion to a *common principle*⁶ (of reason) he never once expands upon in the *Critique*, the *Groundworks* (in which it is postulated), or anything later [b, 391]. Pure moral philosophy is his goal - void of any empiricism, that would consider the way in which people act a posteriori, so as to determine these absolute, abstract grounds of morality (from reason -itself's own abstractness). Kant entirely opposes such a motion for emotions and grounded experiences - what he commonly denotes as *private happiness* - to structure morality here:

⁵ Separating themselves from the practice of empiricism; most all rationalists sought a world explicable via reason alone. Kant, of course, does not follow this similar path whence claiming knowledge as the *unity of apperception*. Instead - what I mean from my remark that follows - is that reason -itself is purported as above the immanent plane: transcendent with its principles, and incapable of producing knowledge of knowledge-itself; and further self-knowledge (ie., of the self or *I*).

⁶ The *common principle* of reason (*gemeinschaftliches Prinzip*) is only alluded to by Kant here, when discussing a necessary connective 'grounds' for speculative and practical reason to flourish.

Empirical principles are wholly incapable of serving as a foundation for moral laws. For the universality with which these should hold for all rational beings without distinction, the unconditional practical necessity which is thereby imposed on them, is lost when their foundation is taken from the *particular constitution of human nature* or the accidental circumstances in which it is placed [b, 442].

But the issue I raise to this is the manner by which emotions directly influence our actions, and rather make reason an *active* form of intuition; through feelings (*kanjō*, 感情) and impulses (*shōdō*, 衝動)⁷ themselves. Rarely are these features of mind ignored, for what better - for what good - do we act more commonly than *through gut feelings*? These notions - and I shan't call them notions any longer, for we all know them by heart - are definitive of a contentful self we are all made aware of through our own experience. And so it is not enough to merely deny their causal effect on action and acting, and abstract from them an ideal of perfection not anywhere on this earth; to merely reference the divine without willing it conscientiously. And so I say, the Kantian notion of the grounds⁸ of reason - as taking the form of some universal principle, purely transcendent - can not remain so (abstract) in the case of a historically framed and contentful world; and further, what I will argue for as a *reflexive self*, should they continue to persist in a maximizable manner. The particulars - of experience and people - must ultimately be reconsidered. My argument, following from the likes of Kitarō Nishida, makes reason -itself a material concept; an actively moving and self-orienting force, which Kant may ultimately have agreed to - to some extent - in his later essays such as *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* where he discusses the practical uses of theoretical judgements. Still, however, I have

⁷ Here I reference terms used by Nishida throughout his *An Inquiry into the Good* (1911), where he also argues against abstract bases of reason.

⁸ The systematic unity of the cognitions supplied by consciousness.

some doubts about this⁹. But I digress; with our basic form of Kantian reason in mind, it is now time we see how reason is applied by Kant to and through the self; as the notion of *self-consciousness* but not self-knowledge, via indexicals. Then we shall proceed with mine and Nishida's favorment of a religious¹⁰ worldview, and expound upon this source of *active intuition*.

Indexicals are, semantically speaking, ways of denoting oneself, others, or objects - such as *I, he/she, you, that*, etc. - in terms of reference. Consequently they change meaning at every particular instance with which context is dependent. Eg., the *I* used whence referring to myself is not the same as the *I* you would use to refer to yourself. And so for sentences such as *I walked to the store* or *I read the newspaper*, there is a contextual link between the subject *I* and the thing being done (the action/verb); but nothing that discloses the thing being done as denoting an implicit quality of the *I*. This semantic process is best described as a self-reference without any means of true identification of the particular to which it references; and thus can be called universal. Kant himself denotes this as the *transcendental subject* of thought, through which one is said to be conscious of oneself but not known to oneself [a, A355]. The further split made by Kant - here - is of delineating the inner sense from that of the outer. The inner, where the harbor of self-consciousness non-objectively presents itself as thinking subject, is not to be confused with the outer sense, wherein: "...bodies are mere appearances of our outer sense, and not things in themselves...we cannot intuit their thoughts, their consciousness, their desires, etc. externally; for all this belongs before inner sense," [a, A358].

⁹ He continues to use the terminology of *subjective* and *objective* when referring to the judgments imposed on - the differentiating forces of - particular and universal claims of knowledge; giving authority to the universal, or *public realm*.

¹⁰ I will make it as clear as possible here, before we even take up Nishida, that the *religious* worldview does not entail a system of beliefs or faith based ideals. There is no god involved, or worship; though Nishida will make many comparisons to this own thought from the likes of Buddhist and Shintoist thinkers such as Dōgen. It is rather a logical reformulation of Kant's own ethical principles, absent of piety. *Religious*, I suggest, implies a cultural - ie., material - basis of affirming and negating.

Nishida would not disagree with Kant here; neither does the Japanese language.¹¹ To know the desires or feelings of another directly is impossible but not underlyingly, *mediately* contentless. Rather, the action of desiring to *know* one's feelings is actively intuited; not merely abstracted from their bodily presence as immediately void. Consider, eg., from the Japanese language, the two statements *I want an apple* (*watashi ha ringo ga hoshī*, 私はリンゴが欲しい) and *she wants an apple* (*kanojo ha ringo wo hoshigatte iru*, 彼女はリンゴを欲しがっている). Depending on the topic¹² of the sentence, the adjective *want* (*hoshī*, 欲しい) changes grammatical form to add a layer of uncertainty in declaring another's desire, but remains affirmative for the self. However, the want of the other is not in any way denied possibility and - as I have stated - becomes actively, or *mediately* sought by the speaker via *want*'s change in form; as *hoshī* becomes *hoshigatte iru* (欲しがっている): meaning more closely, from the above, (*I think*) *she is wanting an apple*. This may seem unimportant for our discussion of the self, pure reason, and all we have just been discussing; but I assure you, this will bring to light significant claims made by Nishida against Kant that we shall now delve into!

Backtracking just a few steps, let us return to the Kantian argument that empirical principles are not to be considered for universal endeavors of moral law; for this is where Nishida begins his *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*:

To Kant, religion has significance as a vehicle that supplements morality. I cannot find in Kant any autonomy given to the religious consciousness itself. Perhaps he never even considered religion as an autonomous sphere. I contend, however, that the religious form of life does not fall within the sphere of mere reason, *bloße Vernunft*. That is why one

¹¹ Japanese language differentiates grammatical structures for terms such as *want*, where it is deemed that the subject of a sentence cannot explicitly know said wants of another person.

¹² *Ha* (は) is a topic marker, not subject marker in Japanese.

who discusses religion must experience, to some extent at least, religious sentiment...[c, pp. 49].

Here we can see Nishida bring to the forefront his notion of *kanjō*, (感情); the so called religious sentiment of everyday experience that must be intuited within the world and not in transcendental form, floating above it. He greatly opposes the idea that a mere formal theory of moral consciousness (of self) can accurately depict the ways real people make decisions; as what action consists of, (ie., producing), and what it possibly produces, (ie., product). Kant's argument for the categorical imperative and moral self takes advantage of this separation between the act of constructing, as a thinking subject, and what is intuitively constructed, as an objective thing. People are rather incredibly emotional beings and ones who do not conform, as he puts it, to stagnant law and such a separation of material. Much like Kant himself argues regarding *private happiness*; the beauty is left in the eye of the beholder. What he suggests however, to amend such differences amongst people, are common transcendental predicates - derived from pure reason's illusory faculties - to heteronomously guide the actions of all, and simultaneously provide a sense of autonomy. As we have already expounded, autonomy will by some means always require limitations; thus what concerns Nishida and I are not the limitations but their enforcement. How will we come to realize this common principle of reason if only through pure rationality? There must be material considerations to mend the paradoxical relationship imposed by *the starry heavens* and *the moral law within*. Abstracting from the material basis - the time and place of thought - will only lead to further idealization and confusion amongst individuals who will then have no idea what the universal right is. Is it not the case after all that beauty standards and all those things we call transcendent themselves change

with passing time?¹³ Reason, just like the indexical *I*, should change with the times and context; something entirely ignored within the *Critique* and in *The Groundworks*. A common example of moral dilemma I often return to, as to expunge such universal mockery of emotional weight as is necessary to reason, is something like the *trolley problem*. Given a junction of train tracks whereon differing sides lie ten people and one person; the universal claim to life demands that more people should survive but without any real explanation: any material one. Pure rationality cannot solve this problem, just as pure moral theory attempts through it. As soon as you ask the person, *well, why should the ten people survive?*, they cannot provide any answer aside from a sentimentally justified one. *Well, ten peoples' deaths would weigh more on my conscience*. Thus, they position themselves from a vector of goodness derived on impulse. The relationary status between you and the people is what fundamentally matters; and not the connection between you and the *moral law* sitting on its throne in the sky. Interactivity, for people - as thinking beings and bodies - and particles of matter alike are always reciprocal and dynamical. In other words, for every reaction there is always an equal and opposite reaction; and wholly the world is persevered through these particular events [b, pp. 51-52]. There exists, however, no reciprocity between the moral law and people if it is lifted from the world and its current conditions.

Life as an autonomous self, from this account, becomes a form of creative expression - what Nishida calls *expressive activity* (*hyōgen sayō*, 表現作用)¹⁴ - which is consistently changing form and thus bleeds content upon the place of its standing and simultaneous birth [c, pp. 52]. It is also referred to later on by Nishida as *pure apperception* (*junsui tōkaku*, 純粹統覚) in place of the *hyōgen sayō* - taking explicit influence from Kant's own faculty of apperception.¹⁵

¹³ The *Enlightenment* is a prime example of this, as I alluded to earlier; whence the *transcendent* attitude of reason sought its domain over all facets of materiality.

¹⁴ Nishida more generously expanded upon the *hyōgen sayō* in his essay *Expressive Action* (1925).

¹⁵ I will continue to use the term *hyōgen sayō* nonetheless; because it more distinctively emphasizes the dynamism of Nishida's philosophy.

Nonetheless, they are very different on the following grounds: *junsui tōkaku* is not a manner of isolated, ie., detached, thinking *of* something, but is itself grounded in the material, reflexive behavior of the world. We see this here, where, “...each self-conscious world is a momentary vector of historical world-space, which mediates its own objective self-determination within itself, and infinitely determines itself through its own process of self-expression,” [c, pp. 59].

More poignantly; morality, god, and the self are all reformulated as reflections of the self nature and not in reference to some unknowable thing - ie., something noumenal. Thus to know the self, ie., in Kantian terms the *transcendental subject* or *I*, we need not search beyond our own immanent place in the world, and constitute perfection as pure ideal. We do not seek to know the theoretical self where this pure reason hangs its hat precisely because there is no posited (or possible) place for its hat to truly hang. There must be a historical, or experiential, component to all facets of reason; and especially to a reason seeking to know itself. And so - from Nishida - the personal self conducted via personality as a point of absolute standing - rather than one of meager particularity or a universally idealized law - is what dominates the conception of the good for all and what guides the self to act morally through the *hyōgen sayō* of *willing will*. Kant, as Nishida puts it, sought to find this transcendent plane for reason to reside in by seeking wholeheartedly to *know the fact of knowing*, or to *know the fact of self* - something Kant ultimately dismissed with *metaphysics* altogether. Whereas Nishida on the other hand sought to *know knowing* as is, through its existential basis and active forms. Pure perfection, beauty, god, and all those transcendental predicates - according to Nishida - are not just ideals sprung from reason but markers of the self-forming individual. They are not mere postulates of theoretical reason which *may* exist outside of us, as Kant calls *supersensible* entities, unprovable by reason’s

own design; they are but only through us existent, in so much as through them, too, we exist. To alleviate the headache this paradox¹⁶ may entail, he provides this quote from Daitō Kokushi:

Buddha and I, distinct through a billion kalpas of time,
Yet not separate for one instant;
Facing each other the whole day through,
Yet not facing each other for an instant (c, pp. 78).

The notion of the reflexive nature of the self is solidified here as a dynamic, affirmative and self-negating expressive force reciprocated between the *hyōgen sayō* and the world's own fluidity. This world, he makes clear however, is not some abstractable place wherein transcendental, pure reason arises. It is a concrete matrix of the logical form, wherein self-transformation is itself made possible and is ultimately realized. This he refers to as *the place* (*basho*, 場所) of all self-conscious activity [c, pp. 73]. A prominent notion, as we see here, of most Japanese philosophy - often dismissed as some phantasmic act of *satori*¹⁷ or mystic art - is the collasation of mind-body duality in accordance with one self-realizing entity. *Basho* is precisely this place from which the *hyōgen sayō* can be exercised freely, via mediated experiences of the self (or mind) as the world (or body). If we now return to our previous example, as I expounded through Japanese semantics earlier, we can see why the reflective nature of self is important for an overall, mediated process of knowing both the self and other.

¹⁶ The paradox we see, further explicated in the quote below, is of a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the absolute; of self and god (Buddha). Buddha is, of course, rarely worshiped as a deity in Japanese culture, and is seen instead as a collective of the particular existence of all things under a universal.

¹⁷ *Satori* is the moment of enlightenment reached in Zen Buddhism; commonly mistaken for, in Western philosophy, some out-of-body experience and encounter with the transcendent plane.

We actively - as through *hyōgen sayō* - in assuming the wants of another seek to know the other's self-expressed desire within; rather than simply assuming them under some *I think, I am* logical framework. The (*I think*) in the (*I think*) *she is wanting an apple* is hardly ever exuded in both English and Japanese alike. Nonetheless it is au fond inferred by our expressive activity, *to know their knowing* and not assume the fact of their self-identity; and most importantly, it is not pursued via reference to the transcendent.

Nishida in offering the *basho* as the grounds from which peoples reflexively *willing will*, provides an ardent logical framework for the possibility of individual selves; not as particular vectors, but as absolute ones irr-referentially determined by the monadic world. To this extent perhaps some would read him as far too religious, in a pious sense; or perhaps as a Spizonist wanting to mend the paradoxical world through *substance*. I do not see either as such, but rather see his brilliance through the semantics themselves. It has been made clear throughout the entirety of this endeavor that language has played a critical role in formulating our arguments; and it is what implicitly sits at the feet of the *hyōgen sayō*. For language is at best the objective means - ie., as speech, written word, signs, etc. - through which the self is intuited and through which the world is itself crafted. Through our own words and through the words of the world, a reflexive process is always at work - wherein speech enters the ear and proceeds through the lips of the other. There is, for the Kantian defender of the moral self, no such redemptive process of the whole of communication; should god and reason continue to operate above the clouds of our own visibility. They must always refer to themselves above us, or below us, should we try to do the same. There are, rather, in this historical place the others who we surround ourselves with and the water we can peer unabridged upon that allow one - at all times - to see their own self. The world, I hope to have illuminated here, is your mirror. And you, in turn, are hers.

Notes

^aKant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1998.

^bKant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Edited by Lara Denis. Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, The Broadview Press, Canada, 2005.

^cNishida, Kitarō. *Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, Last Writings. Translated with an introduction by David A. Dilworth, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987.