

# The Self as Concrete Universal

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Petra von Morstein has presented us with a view of the self as constituted by two distinct elements which can be summarised as our existential awareness, the felt component of experience which is strictly private and immediate, and, the conceptual thinking, that which is public and the basis of language. This dichotomy corresponds roughly to the Kantian one between spontaneity and receptivity. Furthermore, just as Kant's dichotomous self engenders certain alarming results—things-in-themselves, a restricted domain of knowledge, and so on, so too, the dichotomies outlined in the paper before us can issue in something equally, if not more, unfortunate—self-loss and a tragic lack of satisfaction. This is because each side has its own realm and requirements, with the result that the self, in which both sides reside, is simultaneously tugged, so to speak, in both directions. Language is objective, and so limited by concepts. Existential awareness is private and immediate. The claims of both cannot be satisfied. Thus, it seems that all knowledge, whether of self or of others, will be incomplete. Furthermore, all autobiography, or attempts at communication of the innermost self, will be frustrated.

Following the Kantian model, Petra von Morstein does suggest a way out of this dilemma. She posits a faculty of intellectual intuition which makes possible a perfect moment of aesthetic pleasure in which the dichotomy is healed.

I have found this paper in which von Morstein, seeking to quarry the riches of the history of philosophy, has initiated a dialogue with Heidegger, Hegel and mostly Kant, a most thought provoking one. Let me, in the spirit of this dialogue, give the briefest sketch of what could be a Hegelian diagnosis and solution.

Hegel sought to go one better than intellectual intuition, and did so by refusing to accept the finality of the Kantian dualism. This rejection involves a theory of self as the concrete universal. It is infinitely rich, but, more importantly, dialectically infinite. The self is the whole

under the aspect of individuality. It is a developing, concrete process of reflection out to and back from otherness. It is both universal and particular, such that each side reciprocally conditions the other. Thus, just as there is no innermost fabric of things that exists apart from the self, so too, there is no private self isolated from the public. This is argued in the *Phenomenology*. The public and private moments are distinct, yet they exist within an infinite dynamic of ongoing reciprocal determination. My concepts are conditioned by my private self, my private self by my public concepts. The *whole self* is the ongoing unity of this process. Autobiography is possible because the whole self, the real self, is accessible. The strictly private side is an abstraction that has no meaning apart from its existence in the dynamic whole. Nevertheless, for a healthy, living individual, there can be no complete, perfect or finished autobiography because the self, driven by the dialectic of its two sides, is in motion. Thus, for the tragedy of expression and its remedy in the perfect moment, I suggest instead that there can be no complete moment, nothing perfect in the sense of being finished. There can, then, be no perfect satisfaction. There is *pleasure*, in Aristotle's understanding of it as that which accompanies activity.

The self is that unity which is expressed in all my experiences being mine. It is equally an infinitely rich manifold. Both sides are conditioned by the other. Each new public event must change my existential awareness and this awareness must change each and every public event. Thus, at least two kinds of sickness or self-loss can be identified. The first is the death of the self. It occurs when I am no longer open to this process. The second is a kind of memory loss. It is a failure to integrate old visions into the new self. The self must be an infinite accumulation and can fall victim, not only to the tyranny of concepts, but also to the loss of the past self. Of course, the old self cannot be preserved in its pristine state, but it must be sublated, incorporated. I recently dreamed that I was my child-self dipping my foot into very clear water on a sunny morning, just as I used to when growing up on Lake

Huron. Then I suddenly changed and said to myself, "That is you no longer and that will never happen again." I woke up with a face drenched in tears. This dream points to a past mode of receptivity that cannot be repeated, but must be appropriated. I do not yet know how, though, and perhaps this shows how I, in part, have lost myself.

In this commentary, I wished to continue the dialogue. Let me conclude by pointing out two areas in which von Morstein's focusing on the self and its element of existential awareness might prove fruitful. First, the assertion, with which I agree, that truth must consist, not only in

objective verification, but also in fidelity to felt experience, seems to me an effective remedy against the abuses of our age—overweening scientism, attempts to reduce mind to brain, humans to machines, and so on. Second, the horizon of analysis in contemporary moral theory seems to be persons and rights. There is an ineradicable impersonal and adversarial quality to these concepts. Von Morstein suggests that we shift the focus to selves and their flourishing. This seems to me reminiscent of the Greek notion of *arrete* or functional excellence, and as such suggests new partners in our dialogue.

## Pea Soup

You lost your husband's face in a bowl  
of pea soup, when the lentils blocked  
his nose and the green bouillon folded  
his head in two, turned his cocked  
smile down with the spoon and left you  
standing at the table, fork armed  
like a knife, warmed  
and ready.  
Now steady.  
He will not be harmed  
by any of your quick stirs or a few  
splashes in the soup to get a molded  
smile, two straight eyes locked  
into you, staring straight from the bottom of the  
bowl.

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