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Selfhood and Certainty

The Axiomatic Subject

It has long been a commonplace that while modern philosophers have excelled in the more abstract branches of their discipline, they still fail to come up to the standards of the Greeks when it comes to formulating a coherent theory of ethics. The difficulty does not involve their skills at argument or the subtlety of their ethical insights. In the latter, they are probably superior to the ancients. The problem revolves around the modern concept of the self. Attempting to position it as normative, that is, as providing standards for both knowing and acting, they ended by abstracting it from the world. As a result, they eliminated the context required to make sense of the self. The history of how this happened is instructive. On the one hand, it leads to the insight that if this abstraction does rob the self or subject of its intelligible sense, then this sense must come from the world. On the other, it points to the way we should conceive the self if we are to put forward a coherent theory of its capability for moral action.

The intellectual climate of today, with its multiple timidities born of the collapse of the philosophical paradigms of modernity, stands in sharp contrast to the optimism of the period when these paradigms were first fashioned. This is particularly true of the modern conception of the self. It arose in the great expansion of outlook that followed the discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On the one hand, it seemed as if everything was possible. On the other, this very wealth of possibilities threatened to overwhelm all inherited certainties. Different peoples

were discovered with different customs. Not only were the Europeans confronted with ancient, self-sufficient civilizations with different religious and civil traditions, they also faced a bewildering variety of primitive tribes and customs. Such experience prompted Montaigne to write in his essay, "Of Cannibals," that "we have no other criterion of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country wherein we live" (Montaigne 1949, 77–78). Montaigne's skepticism with regard to our criteria for truth achieved a radical literary expression in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. In this international best-seller of the seventeenth century, dreams have the force of reality for the don. He explains any evidence to the contrary as the result of the "enchanters [who] have persecuted, are persecuting, and will continue to persecute me" (Cervantes 1949, 722). Evil and all-powerful, they make it impossible to decide on what precisely is real, what is a dream and what is not. At issue in this novel is not just Montaigne's genial cultural relativism. At stake is the relation of reality and illusion. The success of the don's arguments threatens the certainties by which we distinguish the two.

It is precisely these certainties that are the object of Descartes's method of doubt. Its point is to overcome our skepticism by radicalizing it. Thus, Descartes begins his *Meditations* by noting that from his "earliest years," he has "accepted many false opinions as true." Realizing that everything "concluded from such badly assured premises could not but be highly doubtful and uncertain," his aim is to set them all aside "and start again from the very beginning" (Descartes 1990, 17). To do this he imagines the equivalent of the enchanters that persecute the Don. They reappear as a "*mauvais génie*." Descartes supposes "that . . . an evil spirit, not less clever and deceitful than powerful, has bent all his efforts at deceiving me" (22). How, then, can he tell whether he is dreaming or awake? It seems, in fact, "that there are no conclusive indications by which waking life can be distinguished from sleep" (19). If this is true, then Descartes at once achieves his goal, which is "to destroy generally all my former opinions." They all rest on the belief in the reality of what his senses report to him. This, however, is precisely what the supposition of the *mauvais génie* undermines. To be faithful to this supposition is to engage in a radical resolution: Descartes will "abstain from the belief in things which are not entirely certain and indubitable no less carefully than from belief in those which appear to [him] to be manifestly false" (17). In other words, whatever is not absolutely certain will be set aside. Everything that counts simply as opinion will be eliminated as no more certain than the fiction of a dream.

This devaluation of opinion can be seen as a deframing—one that dislocates the self and its usual processes of inquiry. Normally, I situate

myself through a whole series of unexamined assumptions. I assume that a certain pair of people are my parents, that those I interact with in society are actually who they say they are, that behind the pictures on the television and the voices on the radio real events are transpiring—that the whole is not an illusion. As part of this assumption, I take for granted that within the whole itself are the means for correcting whatever discrepancies I may find. If a certain element I thought was true turns out to be incorrect—if, for example, someone lies to me—the presumption is that inconsistencies will arise. They will lead me to closer examination of the situation and a discovery of the truth. The assumption here is that the criteria for certainty are within the whole itself. Each element is framed by the whole such that each implies the others—this, in such a way that we can go from what we know to what we do not know.¹ Such a procedure does not, of course, imply absolute certainty. Certainty is relative to the context. As Aristotle noted, “precision cannot be expected in the treatment of all subjects alike.” The proper goal is “clarity within the limits of the subject matter” (Aristotle 1962, 5; *Nic. Eth.* 1094b 13–14). In a totality of mutually implicit elements, what is ultimately certain is simply the whole itself. The whole is the ultimate, situating frame. As such, it is the object of Descartes’s doubt. If I cannot trust my perceptions, all the evidence the totality offers to me is devalued. I cannot use any of its relative certainties to inquire into the doubtful. One can also say that in demanding a certainty *within* the whole that only the *whole itself* can have, Descartes deframes the normal process of inquiry. He robs it of the use of everything that is “not entirely certain and indubitable,” thereby eliminating the normal context of inquiry.

What replaces this context is a deductive system of premise and conclusion. To inquire becomes to deduce what we seek from a premise that cannot be doubted. The uncovering of such a premise is, of course, the point of Descartes’s assuming “that everything I see is false.” His goal is to uncover what resists this assumption. He compares it to the fulcrum that Archimedes claimed could be used to “move the earth from its orbit” if only it were “fixed and immovable” (Descartes 1990, 23). The model here is obviously mathematics. The Archimedean fulcrum he is seeking is an axiom. It is both a “truth which is certain and indubitable” and a principle from which other truths can be derived. Two features characterize axiomatic systems. The first is the distinction between the axioms and the propositions derived from them. The truth of the propositions following from the axioms depends on the truth of the axioms, but the reverse relation does not hold. In fact, one cannot prove an axiom. If an axiom could be proved it would not be an axiom, but rather a member of the propositional set derived from axioms.

Axioms are grounds rather than members of these propositional sets. As such, they are *outside of the framework* they set up. The second feature is that only those propositions validly derived from the axioms are a part of this framework. In other words, what cannot be so derived cannot be part of the system of truths the axioms define. Certainty, then, is not a matter of mutual implications within a system. Still less is it something resting on the whole itself. It rather comes from the axioms that stand outside of the propositions they ground. If they are certain, then so is everything validly derived from them. These derived propositions can be used to validly prove further propositions. Everything else, however, is groundless. As not being derived from the axioms, it must be excluded from the deductive process. We can thus see how Descartes's effort to find an Archimedean fulcrum and the wholesale destruction of his previous opinions imply each other. As he writes in the *Discourse on the Method*, the goal is to accept only those items that "conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme" (Descartes 1955a, 89).

Philosophically speaking, the modern conception of selfhood begins when Descartes positions the self as his Archimedean fulcrum. Given that what is to be deduced is nothing less than the world itself—that is, the world that we experience and claim as "real"—this move immediately transforms what counts as a "self." Such a self cannot be part of this world; its content cannot be derived from it. This becomes apparent once we consider what remains when we reduce the self to an *ens certissimum*—"an absolutely certain being." The self that is completely indubitable is not a person having parents, social relations, and so on. It is not an individual with a "face, hands, arms, and all this mechanism composed of bone and flesh and members" (Descartes 1990, 25). All these could be the illusions of a dream. In Descartes's words, it could well be "that I have no senses; . . . that body, shape, extension, motion and location are merely inventions of my mind" (23). What cannot be doubted is only the self that might be subject to such illusions. To be subject to them is still to exist. Thus, even if a *mauvais génie* bends all his efforts to deceive me, "there can," Descartes writes, "be no slightest doubt that I exist, since he deceives me" (24). Of course, given that bodily extension is one of the deceptions he might be imposing on me, my self-certainty has to exclude the fact of embodiment. In other words, in terms of self-certainty, I have to say "that I am entirely and truly distinct from my body." Since the certain cannot depend upon the doubtful, it also follows that I "can be or exist without [this body]" (74).

The "I" that Descartes is referring to is the self that is being positioned as an Archimedean fulcrum. Such a self stands outside the world of "body, shape, extension, motion," and so on. In itself, it is only a

nonextended “thinking thing.” “Thought,” Descartes asserts, “is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone is inseparable from my nature” (Descartes 1990, 26; see also 74). Thought, here, is a generic term. It includes such things as doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, imagining, and sensing—in short, all the elements we designate by consciousness (27). What it does not include are the *correlates* to these actions. The correlates can be doubted; they could be fictions provided by the *mauvais génie*. What cannot be doubted is simply our attending to them in these different activities. Strictly speaking, the self that does attend to them is not any one of these activities. It does not change with the change of conscious contents. Rather, as Descartes asserts, “it is one and the same mind which as a complete unit wills, perceives, and understands. . . .” Since I cannot say I am a different mind when I will or understand or sense, as I often perform these activities simultaneously, these activities do not point to different “parts” of myself. “I am,” rather, “a thing which is absolutely unitary” (81). What I am, as later thinkers have pointed out, is only a unity of attending that persists through these different activities.

Such remarks result in a radical deframing of the self. They position the self as outside of the totality for which it is supposed to serve as an Archimedean fulcrum. Since this totality is nothing less than the world, selfhood thus becomes emptied of all worldly content. In Descartes’s words, what I cannot doubt is “that indescribable part of myself which cannot be pictured by the imagination” (Descartes 1990, 28). It cannot, since as completely *nonextended* it is not part of the experienced, physical world. Its status as a thoroughgoing unity also moves us to distinguish it from the descriptions of consciousness—e.g., those of willing, sensing, and so on—taken as distinct activities. What we are left with is the notion of a self as an essentially contentless unity. Distinguished from all its possible objects, it becomes objectively anonymous. It cannot be named or described in terms of any of the objects it attends to. As a unity of attending, it also separates itself from the content of the changing acts of consciousness.² Thus, to the degree that we attempt to make it indubitable—i.e., serve as our Archimedean fulcrum—it escapes our grasp. Descartes’s foundational, axiomatic method thus leaves us in the curious position of attempting to base objective knowledge on what can, itself, never be objectively known.

To fill this out, we have to turn to the underlying problem the *Meditations* tries to resolve. This is the problem posed for knowledge by embodiment. Behind the specter of the *mauvais génie* is the thought that nature itself—specifically Descartes’s nature as a mixture of mind and body—might be deceptive. Thus, in the First Meditation, the *mauvais*

génie is taken as an evil, all-powerful god who has created Descartes such that he always errs. To those who doubt the necessity of supposing such a god, Descartes replies, “[T]o whatever degree less powerful they consider the author to whom they attribute my origin, in that degree it will be more probable that I am so imperfect that I am always mistaken” (Descartes 1990, 21). As he puts the same point in the last Meditation, the origin of the doubt raised by this specter was that “pretending not to know the author of my being, I saw nothing to make it impossible that I was so constructed by nature that I should be mistaken even in the things which seem to me most true” (73). Thus, it seems most true “that in an object which is hot there is some quality similar to my idea of heat; that in a white, or black, or green object there is the same whiteness, or blackness, or greenness which I perceive; that in a bitter or sweet object there is the same taste or the same flavor, and so on for the other senses” (77). None of this, however, is true. These apparent qualities have their origin, not in the objects apprehended, but in the peculiar structure of Descartes’s senses. The purpose of these senses, however, is not objective truth, but rather survival. In Descartes’s words, my bodily senses are there “only to indicate to my mind which objects are useful or harmful” to my embodied state (79). As such, the information they provide is strictly relative to it. The question, then, is: How can we get beyond this relativity to apprehend what pertains to the objects themselves?

It is at this juncture that the self plays its role as an Archimedean fulcrum for Descartes’s system. In doubting everything else, I cannot doubt the self that is doubting. In this very inability to be doubted, the self functions as an epistemological axiom. We can derive from its indubitability the two essential standards for knowing. The first of these is clarity: we are absolutely clear on the fact that we exist, any doubts to the contrary being overwhelmed by the sheer fact of our self-presence. The second is distinctness: we cannot confuse our own being with any other’s. The existence that we affirm is distinctly our own. This holds, in particular, when we attempt to deny our existence. The selfhood that we cannot deny clearly distinguishes itself from all that can be doubted as pertaining to ourselves. Descartes thus writes of the affirmation of his existence, “[I]n this first conclusion there is nothing else which assures me of its truth, but the clear and distinct perception of what I affirm” (Descartes 1990, 34). He turns this into an epistemological axiom when he adds, “Therefore it seems to me that I can already establish as a general principle that everything which we conceive very clearly and very distinctly is wholly true” (34). In other words, to the degree that our perceptions and thoughts of corporal objects approach the clarity and

distinctness of our grasp of ourselves, we can be equally certain of the reality of their objects.

How do objects exhibit this exemplary clarity and distinctness? In what way are we to conceive them so that they become clear and distinct? For Descartes, there is a ready answer to these questions—one that points to the numerable aspects of reality. Numbers are both clear and distinct. Between any two of them, no matter how close in the number series they are, there is a clear difference that prevents us from confusing one with another. Given that clarity and distinctness are standards of truth, Descartes can therefore assert, “[E]verything which I conceive clearly and distinctly as occurring in [corporeal objects]—that is to say, everything, generally speaking, which is discussed in pure mathematics or geometry—does in truth occur in them” (Descartes 1990, 76). Descartes’s focus is on these objects’ “size or extension,” their shapes (considered as a “limitation” of extension), the relative positions and the change of these positions, as well as their “duration” and “number.” All these factors can be measured; hence, all can be conceived “clearly and distinctly” (41). What is excluded from this list of numerable aspects are the immediate givens of our five senses: the colors, odors, tastes, sounds, and tactile qualities (the smoothness, roughness, softness, hardness, etc.) of the bodies we encounter. Not only do these shifting sensuous qualities lack clarity and distinctness, but what they present points more to ourselves than to the objects we grasp. Specifically, they point to the particularities of our perceptual organs. As Descartes’s analyses of bodily illnesses such as jaundice and dropsy indicate, changes in our bodily state result in the change of the sensuously appearing object. To require that our bodily senses grasp the object as it is in itself is, thus, to embrace a contradiction. In demanding that what our senses present *not* be relative to our bodily state, we require that our bodily organs be somehow independent of our body.

The move towards the numerable aspects of the object is intended to overcome the relativity of embodiment. This overcoming is through an abstraction. To apply number to bodies, we have to count. Counting, however, requires that we abstract from what we count everything that does not pertain to the unit we employ. For example, in counting apples, the unit I employ abstracts from all individual differences between the apples. The same holds when I count fruit. Here the unit—understood as that by which each of the things I count is one—abstracts from the differences of different types of fruit. In counting very different objects, I must, in fact, abstract from all their given features and consider each of them only in its quality of being one. Now, it

is not just in their numerability that the lengths, positions, and motions of bodies require abstraction. Even before we apply numbers to them, the grasp of these features already presupposes increasing levels of abstraction. Thus, we must abstract from color to consider length as such. Similarly, the grasp of position requires that we attend only to the relative location of a body, while to apprehend motion as motion, we must abstract again to focus on the change of position. For a grasp of velocity or *quantity* of motion, this change of position must itself be quantified and considered in relation to a quantity of duration. Each such abstraction is a move away from the peculiarities of our embodiment. A body's perceived color depends on the structure of our eyes. Its length, expressed as a number of units, does not. The same holds for its position, as expressed by its x and y coordinates on a Cartesian grid. What apprehends the object in such terms is, to use Descartes's phrase, "solely an inspection by the mind."³ In such an inspection, what the bodily senses present is abstracted from, since it pertains more to us than to the object itself.

To get to the object in itself requires, of course, more than simply abstraction. This abstraction must be directed towards what Descartes calls the "corresponding variations" in the actual as opposed to the sensuously present objects. The sensuous qualities of the objects point to myself—i.e., to the structure of my bodily senses. The changes of these qualities, however, point beyond this to corresponding changes in the actual objects. As Descartes reasons, nothing can come from nothing. Every perceptual event must ultimately have some objective cause. Thus, "from the fact that I perceive different kinds of colors, odors, tastes, sounds, heat, hardness, and so on, I very readily conclude that in the objects from which these various sense perceptions proceed there are some corresponding variations" (Descartes 1990, 77). These variations are to be taken as changes in the numerable aspects of the body. A Cartesian would assert, for example, that to a change in sound there corresponds a change in the numerical frequency of the sound wave. Of course, the change in the sound wave is actually quite different from the change in heard sound, which is experienced as a change in pitch. As Descartes admits, "these variations are not really similar to the perceptions" (77). This, however, is to be expected. It is a function of our proceeding beyond what is specific to ourselves to what pertains to the object in itself. The lack of similarity between the heard pitch and the frequency at which the pressure ridges in the air strike the ear is based on a double abstraction. Objectively, we abstract from the sound all its felt qualities. Its nature becomes reduced to a mathematically describable account of the motion of groups of particles striking the eardrum. Subjectively, we

abstract from the self that investigates the nature of the sound all the special features of its embodiment. Insofar as we apprehend the sound only through “an inspection by the mind,” we actually enact Descartes’s distinction of mind and body. As pure, disembodied observers, not only do we overcome the problem for knowledge posed by our embodiment; each of us also becomes the ideal scientific witness whose observations are repeatable by every other properly trained observer.

The difficulties with this solution are not with its practice, which has actually worked quite well in the centuries that have seen the development of modern science. They concern rather the attempt to make sense of this practice. How do we understand the scientist that engages in it? Can she be grasped in terms of the science that she accomplishes? In other words, can her activity be understood in terms of its results? Such questions recall the fact that an axiom is outside of the system it grounds. If Descartes’s ideal, disembodied observer does function as an axiom, this observer must also stand outside of the system it determines. This system, however, is modern science itself. This implies that the scientist’s functioning to determine science cannot, itself, be understood in scientific terms. That this is the case follows from the self’s disembodied status. This status is essential for the self’s indubitability. It is thus required for it to serve as an axiom for the clarity and distinctness that mathematics exhibits. The nonextended self, however, can have none of the features that mathematics fastens on in pursuit of Cartesian science. Bodies have figure, size, motion, and numerable parts. A completely nonextended self does not. If the world explored by science consists of such qualities, the nonextended self of the scientist is absent from this world. Not only can we not grasp its functioning in terms of this world, it is impossible to see how it can be in contact with it. At what physical point does the nonextended touch the extended? Bodies touch by coming into contact at their extremities, but the nonextended self has no extremities. The problem here is not just that of trying to imagine how this self would receive any information (any “data”) from the extended world. It is how it would communicate at all with it. In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes proposes that the soul communicates to “the machine of the body” by means of a “little gland,” the pineal. Moving the gland, the soul moves the body (Descartes 1955b, 347; art. 34). Yet, given that between the extended and the nonextended there can be no point of physical contact, this obviously will not work. The difficulty here, as Locke pointed out, is that we lack even an idea of the connection between the two. The nonextended self must first perceive the world in its sensuous features to perform the abstractions that present the world as it is in itself—the world of primary (numerable) qualities such as sizes,

shapes, and motions. Yet we cannot explain such sensuous perceptions in terms of such qualities. As we earlier cited Locke, “[W]e can by no means conceive how any size, figure, or motion of any particles, can possibly produce in us the idea of any colour, taste, or sound whatsoever: there is no conceivable connection between the one and other” (Locke 1995, 445; bk. 4, chap. 3, sec. 13).

What we confront here is an instance of the basic aporia that bedevil modernity’s twin ideals of individual autonomy and universality. These ideals come together in the attempt—characteristic of modernity—to make the subject normative. By this we mean the attempt to draw from it universal standards. In Descartes, this takes the form of transforming the self into an *ens certissimum*, a being whose certainty is such that it can stand as a standard for all other claims to knowledge. Thus, the method of doubt is intended to position the subject as an autonomous source of certainty. Its goal is the self as an axiom from which universal standards of clarity and distinctness can be drawn. The result, however, is the transformation of the self into the opposite of this: the self becomes the most obscure element in the Cartesian “system.” What makes it obscure is the abstraction required to position the self as an ultimate standard. This abstraction is a deframing—a pulling the self out of the world in which it normally functions and has its sense as an embodied individual. What this transformation points to, then, is the inability of the self to sustain this abstraction. It indicates its essential dependence on the frame that both situates and particularizes it.

The Subject as Synthesizer

Kant repeats Descartes’s attempt to make the self normative and attains roughly the same result. Once again the endeavor is motivated by the search for certainty. As before, it is prompted by the specter of skepticism—this time raised by the empiricism of Hume. Limiting himself to the “ideas” that can trace their origin to impressions, Hume declares that “there is nothing in any object, consider’d in itself, which can afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion beyond it” (Hume 1973, 139; bk. 1, pt. 3, sec. 12). All the conclusions we draw come not from objects, but from the habits we gain through our experience of them. Similar sequences of experience, when repeated, breed a habit (or “custom”) of expectation. We come to expect that the experiential patterns connecting objects will repeat themselves. Such expectation is our only basis for inference. We may, for example, imagine that some necessary connection exists between two objects—the one being thought as the cause of the other—

but, in fact, as Hume writes, “Objects have no discoverable connection together; nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination, that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of another” (103; bk. 1, pt. 3, sec. 8). In this view, all inference is actually a species of association. It is limited to moving between the experiences we associate because of their resemblance, contiguity, and frequent conjunction. This limitation implies that we cannot infer from experience the existence of something underlying experience. We are limited to the immediate givens of experience. This means, according to Hume, that “we have . . . no idea of substance distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities [given as contents of our perceptions]” (16; bk. I, pt. I, sec. 6). When, for example, the self trains its view on itself, it finds nothing substantial, but only a “bundle or collection of different perceptions” (252; bk. I, pt. 4, sec. 6).

Kant’s response to this is contained in his famous “Copernican turn.” Accepting Hume’s argument that the knowledge of necessary “apriori” connections cannot be drawn from objects, he seeks it in the subject. In his words: “Previously it was assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to establish something apriori about them through concepts which would increase our knowledge have failed under this assumption. We should try then to see if we would not make more progress in the tasks of metaphysics by assuming that objects must conform to our knowledge” (Kant 1955c, 11–12; B xvi). To see objects as conforming to our knowledge is, Kant adds, to see the experience through which they can be known as *conforming to our concepts*. It is based on the suppositions that “experience itself is a type of knowledge requiring understanding; and understanding has rules which I must presuppose as being in me prior to objects’ being given to me. These rules find expression in apriori concepts with which all experiential objects must conform and agree” (11–12; B xvi). Such rules of the understanding are rules of synthesis, the very synthesis that results in objects’ being given. The rules are “apriori” in the sense of being prior to such givenness. Their necessity is simply that of subjective conditions for the possibility of experience. Whatever violates them cannot be experienced, since all objective experience occurs through the operation of these rules of synthesis.

Kant’s reply to Hume is, thus, to trace the necessity of inference, not to objects, but to the subject that experiences these objects. When I assert, for example, that every event has its cause, the concept of “cause” expresses a category of the understanding to which objects must conform. This is because the assertion expresses a rule of my understanding, one I constantly use to make sense of my world. Were

something to suddenly appear without any possible cause, I would probably assume that I was dreaming or hallucinating. In any event, I would not take the object as actually given—i.e., as part of the real world. I simply don't put together what I see so that things just pop in or out of existence without any reason.⁴ Now, this “putting together” is *my* act of synthesis or combination. What synthesizes is the subject itself. In Kant's words, combination, “being an act of the self-activity (*Selbsttätigkeit*) of the subject, can only be performed by the subject itself” (Kant 1955c, 107; B 131). It is the subject (rather than any object) that combines what it sees to make sense of its world. In Kant's words, “combination . . . is an act of the spontaneity of its ability to represent (*Vorstellungskraft*)” an objective world (67). The upshot is that the synthesizing subject becomes what Kant calls “the transcendental ground of the necessary lawfulness of appearances composing an experience” (Kant 1955b, 93; A 127, my translation throughout). Behind the lawfulness of appearances is the lawfulness of the subject putting together these appearances. It is the subject's following given rules in its understanding of its world. Following them, it makes sense of its experience—that is, it interprets this experience as proceeding from objects that are actually “out there.” The experience that does not conform to these rules never gets this interpretation. Thus, the subject never experiences objects “out there” violating this lawfulness.

The result of this Copernican turn can be expressed in three mutually implicit characterizations of the self. First and most obvious is the positioning of the self as normative. Kant calls the self the “ground of the necessary lawfulness of appearances” because the rules of its understanding determine the universal structures of appearance. These rules can be called norms insofar as objective experience must meet their standards if it is to be possible. The essential concept here is that of synthesis, the rules of the understanding being those of synthesis. It is, then, by virtue of its action of synthesis that the self that understands has its normative position. Such synthesis or combination “can only be performed *by the subject itself*.” This means that “we cannot represent to ourselves anything as combined in the object without ourselves first having combined it . . .” (Kant 1955c, 107; B 130). With this we come to the subject's second characterization, which is its absolute unity. The fact that all combination requires a combiner implies that the combining subject must itself be uncombined. Otherwise it would be the *result* rather than the ground of combination. It, however, is this ground, since it alone can combine. One can also say that since combination can only be performed by the subject, if the subject were itself combined, there would have to be another subject behind it acting as *its* combiner. If this last

were combined, the same reasoning would obtain. To avoid this regress, we thus have to assert that “nothing multiple is given” in the combining subject (110; B 135). Like Descartes’s mind or self, it must be conceived as a “thoroughgoing identity” (87; A 116).

The fact that the subject is an uncombined unity immediately positions it beyond the categories of the understanding. This follows because the rules of the understanding are rules for combination. They express the “universal and necessary connection of the given perceptions” required if we are to grasp an objective world (Kant 1995d, 298 §19, my translation; see also 1995d, 304; §21a). Thus, the categories of our understanding, such as substance, causality, unity, and so on, apply to the appearing world because the rules embodying these categories determine the perceptual connections through which objects appear. Given, however, the fact that the combining subject must itself be uncombined, none of these categories can apply to it. Thus, the third characterization of the subject is negative. The synthesizing subject cannot be described in terms of the categories. Even the category of unity, insofar as it contains the thought of the unity of the multitude of perceptions composing an experience, does not apply to it. The unity of the subject, “which precedes apriori all concepts of combination,” Kant asserts, “is not the category of unity” (Kant 1955c, 108; B131). The unity that “first makes possible the concept of combination” is not the same as the unity that is a category of the understanding. The same holds for all the other concepts by which the understanding makes sense of its experience. They do not apply to the subject in its “thoroughgoing identity.” We cannot, for example, say that this subject is causally determined. To do so would link its appearances in a necessary chain. But the subject in its thoroughgoing identity is prior to these appearances. As prior, it may be characterized as inherently free. Such freedom, however, signifies simply our inability to apply the category of causality to it. Its status as an uncombined combiner is such that it is completely undetermined by the experience it makes possible. None of its categories apply to it. In its action of combination, it thus enjoys a complete autonomy. It determines itself in the “spontaneity of its ability to represent” the world.

The difficulties of this position are similar to those we found in Descartes’s account of the self. Both Kant and Descartes, in positioning the subject as normative, abstract it from the context in which it has its sense. Thus, as just noted, none of the categories, taken as rules of combination, apply to it. Kant, for example, may speak of a “transcendent affection” as providing the sensuous material required for subjective syntheses. The attempt, however, to explain how an object can “affect” our sensibility immediately runs into difficulties once we realize that we

cannot speak here of “causality” in Kant’s terms. The category cannot apply to the subject “in itself,” i.e., the subject actually engaged in synthesis. How, then, does the world affect the subject? As a noted Kant scholar says, “[A]ffection’ cannot be causation in Kant’s sense. But then, what else can it be?” (Robinson 1989, 279). Once again, we face the question of how the self or subject can interact with the world. For Descartes, the problem involved the nonextended nature of the normative subject. The difficulty, as Locke noted, is that the categories applicable to the extended world—those of “size, figure, or motion”—do not apply to this subject: We cannot conceive how an account employing such categories can explain subjective experience. The difficulty for Kant is even greater. It involves the inapplicability of *all* our categories. Such categories express the way we make sense of our world. They compose the framework of our understanding in its most general terms. The *actual* subject—the subject that acts—stands outside of this frame.

In Kant’s account, the subject does not just escape the framework of appearing sense; it is also outside of appearance as such. To see this, we must note with Kant that all appearing requires connected perceptions. It is, for example, through the perspectively connected series of perceptions that spatial-temporal objects appear. Limited to a single unconnected intuition of an object, we would have only a momentary apprehension of one of its sides. This is insufficient to even distinguish it from its background. For this, we have to connect (and, thereby, “combine”) the appearances that pertain to it. By virtue of this action, these appearances become presentations (*Vorstellungen*) of one and the same object. This object, which is the referent of all the momentary apprehensions, gathers in itself their time determinations. It persists through them. The same process applies to the subject’s own appearance. As an acting combiner, it connects its momentary self-intuitions. The acting self is prior to such action. Its appearance to itself, however, is determined by the result of this action. As temporally extended, it appears in and through the multiplicity (or “manifold”) of perceptions it connects. Thus, for Kant, while I do have an immediate (if fleeting) consciousness of myself as the combiner, if I want to intuitively grasp myself or my extended activity of combining or connecting, I must do so in terms of the manifold I have combined. The subject that appears through this is temporally extended; it persists through all the momentary perceptions that form the manifold. The uncombined subject that engages in this combination is, however, not temporally extended. It cannot be if it is the ground rather than the result of this action of combination. In fact, since all appearing requires combination of the manifold, as uncombined, the acting subject cannot appear. Combination is

its function; yet, as a combiner, it falls outside of the appearing made possible by combination.

According to Descartes, the I that thinks is that “indescribable part of myself which cannot be pictured by the imagination” (Descartes 1990, 28). I know that I exist as a thinking being, but what I know cannot be described in terms of the appearing world. My self-presence is thus both certain and indescribable. The same points hold in Kant’s account of the self. According to him, “I exist as an intelligence which is conscious solely of its power of combination” (Kant 1955c, 124; B 158). Yet such consciousness, insofar as it is directed to what is uncombined, never becomes descriptive. In Kant’s words, the subject’s “consciousness of itself is very far from being a knowledge of the self . . .” (123; B 158). In fact, he adds, “I have no knowledge of myself as I am but merely as I appear to myself” (123; B 158). Such appearance is in terms of the results of combination: I can intuit myself as existing in time, as persisting through it. Given this, I have to say with Kant that my “power of combination . . . can be made intuitable only according to the relations of time.” Since, however, this power is nontemporal, it “can know itself only as it appears to itself . . .” (124; B 158–59). This cannot be otherwise, given that the inner sense by which we grasp ourselves “presents even ourselves to consciousness only as we appear to ourselves, not as we are in ourselves” (120; B 152–53). What then is the status of Kant’s account of combination? Is it a description of the appearing or actual self? As Edmund Husserl remarked, Kant’s procedure seems to leave us with “a mode of the subjective which we, in principle, cannot make intuitive to ourselves either by factual examples or by genuine analogy” (Husserl 1962, 116). To make it intuitive is to remain with the appearing subject. The actual subject, however, is positioned on the other side of the categories of appearance. It is their ground, but precisely as such it escapes being categorized by them. This cannot be otherwise, since the categories of the understanding, which we employ to make sense of appearance, cannot apply to the acting subject.

The positioning of the subject “in itself” as noumenal or nonappearing does not just exclude it from the framework of intelligibility set up by the categories. As just noted, it renders deeply problematic Kant’s account of subjective synthesis. The account is intended to position the subject as normative—that is, as an autonomous source of certainty. Kant’s “Copernican turn” sees it as the answer to Hume’s skepticism. The result, however, is a transformation similar to that which we encountered in Descartes’s account. The subject, positioned as normative, becomes the most obscure item in Kant’s system. We cannot know anything of its nature “in itself.” Even the descriptions of

its action of synthesis—the very actions that position it as normative—are deeply problematic. We can use none of the categories this action establishes to render Kant’s account of it intelligible. Thus, as in Descartes’s account, the very attempt to position the subject as normative eliminates the context required to make sense of the subject. Its normativity depends upon its being as a synthesizer, but such being (which is that of an uncombined combiner) abstracts it from the appearing world. Thus, once again we face an abstraction that is a deframing in the sense that it pulls the subject out of the framework of world. Once again the resultant obscurities indicate the inability of the self to sustain this abstraction. Ontologically, they point to its inability to be independently of the frame.

These difficulties indicate the necessity of reversing our view of the self. If the subject or self that is abstracted from the world loses its intelligible sense, this sense must come from the world. This implies that the self, rather than being autonomous, is essentially dependent on its situating framework. Rather than being unaffected by the world, it must be open to it. Such openness is not just epistemological, not just a matter of the self’s knowing being dependent on the givenness of the world. It is also ontological. Aristotle’s original expression of this ontological openness remains instructive. Speaking of the self simply as mind or intelligence, he writes, “[B]efore mind thinks,” that is, before it grasps an object, “it has no actual existence” (Aristotle 1964, 164; *De Anima* 429a. 24). It is “potentially identical with the objects of its thought”—indeed, this potentiality is its openness. But, as he adds, it “is actually nothing until it thinks” (168; 429b. 31). We can express this openness in more modern terms by speaking of temporalization. According to Kant, all “our representations . . . are subject to time, the formal condition of inner sense. Time is that in which they must be ordered, connected and brought into relation” (Kant 1955b, 77; A 99). On the level of “inner sense,” the sense by which we grasp our conscious processes, we are, formally regarded, simply a series of temporal relations. From this point of view, our openness to the world is the openness of time. This explains why, in temporal terms, the mind is nothing before it thinks. The nothingness of Aristotle’s potential (or “passive”) mind points to time’s lack of inherent content. This lack is time’s openness. Since it lacks any content of its own, time per se is capable of exhibiting every sort of content. One could say that this capability rests on its moments being empty containers—or rather, placeholders—of possible contents. This, however, has to be qualified insofar as it is this very lack of any inherent, distinguishing content that undercuts the notion of time’s having discrete moments. Since what distinguishes the

moments is the content that fills them, time's lack of inherent content is a correlative of the continuity of time.

If subjectivity is a field of temporal relations, the openness of time implies that its content must come from its objects. Its being as such a field *is*, in other words, *its openness* to what is not itself. Given the variety of situations the subject can find itself in, this openness implies a number of possible forms of subjective existence. As a field of temporal relations, the subject is capable of as many forms as time has. We can, for example, speak of subjectivity as sheer nowness, subjectivity as temporal flowing, subjectivity as the forms of objective synthesis, subjectivity as our being-there in and through other persons (our being timed by them), and even of subjectivity as the unidirectional flow of objective causality (the flow that allows us to suppose that our own inner relations are subject to causal laws). Each corresponds to a different situation of the subject—or, what is the same, an openness to a different type of object. When I grasp a mathematical relation (when at the moment of insight I am no longer conditioned by the before and after of time), then I exhibit the first form of subjectivity. I exhibit a very different form playing with others as a member of an ensemble. All of this, of course, assumes that the subject actually is the field of temporal relations grasped by inner sense. For Kant, however, the field is the subject only as it appears, not as it is in itself. With his focus on normativity, Kant takes the appearing subject as the result of the nonappearing synthesizing subject. Not to take this step is to stay with the sense of subjectivity as temporality. To think through this sense, however, is to engage in the reversal that returns us to the Aristotelian conception of the subject as an openness. Rather than being taken as the result of the subject's synthetic action, temporality, in this view, becomes the subject's ontological condition. Time, in other words, is understood as the openness of subjectivity. Thus, rather than being regarded as the author of time, the subject is seen as temporalized by the world, its different forms resulting from different temporalizations.

To pursue the epistemological and ontological implications of this reversal would lead us too far afield. They have, in fact, already been discussed elsewhere.⁵ The ethical implications are, however, of concern to us. My goal in the following chapters will be to draw them out. Here I will only note the challenge they pose for any attempt to base an ethics on the sense of selfhood they define. Kant's account, for all its difficulties, has a great advantage. Its positioning the subject beyond the world gives it the autonomy to judge the world. It is not limited to expressing its particular situation; its actions are not just a response to it. As

autonomous, the subject can ethically appraise its response. It can set its own criteria for judging its actions. Behind this autonomy is Kant's positioning of the subject as the combiner of its experiences. Such combination generates, not just the apparent object, but also the time through which this persists. As such, it is responsible for all the temporal relations, *including those of causality*, that characterize the appearing world. Its freedom is a function of this. As a ground of time, the subject "in itself" is prior to time. As prior, it has the ontological autonomy that it expresses in the voluntary actions that are subject to ethical standards. The task faced by an ethics that sees the self as temporalized by the world is to establish the self's autonomy *in these terms*. It is to see it as a function of the self's being so temporalized. If, for Kant, the self's freedom is grounded in its being before time, the challenge here is to see this "before time" through time. It is to see the escape from time occurring through the self's being temporalized by the factors that situate it. As we shall see, these factors include the other persons it encounters. The experience of other selves does not just situate the self, giving it a place in the intersubjective world. Being temporalized by such experience also desituates or decenters it. It pulls the subject or self out of the world that is centered on itself. As such, it gives the self-centered subject a certain "inner distance" from itself. When properly understood, this inner distance will be seen to form the core of its autonomy.

The task of seeing the "before time" through time can be put in terms of the dichotomy that Kant and Descartes leave us with. The appearing world for both Cartesian science and Kantian ethics is a place of necessity. Nothing within it occurs without a prior cause, the linking of cause and effect continuing without apparent beginning or end. The self, however, escapes this determination. Whether we take it as nonextended or as prior to time, it becomes the place of a nonappearing freedom. The necessity for taking it as such is obvious for both ethics and science. Only a free self can be called to account for its actions. It is morally responsible only for its voluntary actions. Similarly, only a free self is free to scientifically investigate the world. Given that the laws of knowing (e.g., the laws of mathematical and logical inference) are distinct from those of causality, the knowing self must have a sufficient independence of the laws of causality to follow those of knowing. The dichotomy, then, is between framing and freedom. It is between a situating, necessarily determining world and a self that escapes its determination. The way to escape this dichotomy is to redefine both self and world. It is to engage in a reversal that sees the escape from the frame as inherent in the frame itself.

A theoretical account of how our being timed by others both situates us and supports our autonomy will have to wait till chapter 6. A concrete example of this, however, is readily available: literary works continually offer us instances of framing and escape from the frame. The characters whose lives we imaginatively enter into as we read literature show how our actual others both frame and deframe us. Rather than presenting us with a sterile dichotomy between necessity and autonomy, literature avoids this altogether. It points to a way of relating the self to the world that is quite different from the accounts provided by Descartes and Kant. In the next chapter, I will examine how it does this in the context of the difference between the sciences and the humanities.