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Humanities and the Idea of a Person in the 22nd Century: Kant, Descartes, Sellars

Main Description

Science starts out with the idea of a person as billions of neurons housed in a body that is a cloud of particles. Common sense starts out with the idea of a person having capacities belonging to a single individual. The common sense person does not have parts. Our objectifying science slowly takes over the person as it tends toward physical materialism. Where will it end? What is being gradually pushed out of the world? If science had already taken over, if the categories of neuroscience were complete, then it would be possible to speculate about its relation to earlier stages of thought. However, that is not the situation. The categories of science have yet to emerge. The puzzling character of new scientific objects reveals that we are on the threshold of profound conceptual change. The

Humanities are at a crossroad. Do the Humanities scoff at the encroachment of science and risk the fate of those who resisted the Copernican revolution? Do they embrace the changes only to be burned at the stake like those who accepted the Copernican revolution? I suggest that the Humanities mobilize their collective power to *create* the categories in terms of which science will explicate the very idea of a person. Over the last fifty years, philosophers in the Kantian tradition have offered strategies for developing the new categories in humanistic terms. One approach follows “color” and “consciousness” through their passage from a common sense image of the world to a developing scientific image. It is a journey that illustrates the problems and the puzzles ahead. It indicates the perils of the next recategorization of the world.

Short Description

The idea of a person in the scientific image conflicts with idea of a person in the common sense image. The Humanities must reconcile these clashing images.

Keywords

Conceptual Change
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Scientific Image
Self Awareness

Person as Subject

Rene Descartes
Immanuel Kant
Wilfrid Sellars

Humanities and the Idea of a Person in the 22nd Century

Science starts out with the idea of a person as billions of neurons housed in a body that is a cloud of particles. Commonsense starts out with the idea of a person having capacities belonging to a single, unified individual. The Commonsense person does not have parts. Our objectifying science has slowly taken over the person as science tends toward physical materialism. Where will it end? What is being gradually pushed out of the world? If science had already taken over, if the categories of neuroscience were complete, then it would be possible to speculate about its relation to earlier stages of thought. However, that is not the situation. The categories of science have yet to emerge. The puzzling character of new scientific objects reveals that we are on the threshold of profound conceptual change. The Humanities are at a crossroad. If the humanistic disciplines scoff at the encroachment of science, do they risk the fate of those who resisted the Copernican revolution? Or, do the Humanities embrace the changes and sow the seeds of their own destruction? I suggest that the Humanities mobilize their collective power to *create* the categories in terms of which science will explicate the very idea of a person. Over the last fifty years, thinkers in the Kantian tradition have offered strategies for developing the requisite new categories in humanistic terms. One approach follows “perceiving” and “thinking” in their passage from a common sense image of the world to a developing scientific image. It is a journey that illustrates the problems and the puzzles ahead. It indicates the perils of the next great recategorization of reality.

Revolution

If we were to define the concept of a person over the last century in its essential characteristic with a single word, that would no doubt be Revolution. Indeed, revolutionary movements have characterized the study of personality—the concept of a person—and have usurped one another with clock-like regularity. Our concept of a person has been assaulted through all manner of internal upheavals. One might say that revolution is as much a part of the study of personality as the pursuit of a better life is part of the social machinery in most countries of the world. But it is the frequency of revolutionary occurrences that makes the impartial observer prone to ignore the challenges that emerge out of so many and so fundamental conceptual shifts.

The constellation of problems in contemporary metaphysics and the concept of a person revolve around the apparently irreconcilable differences between our first-person “Manifest Image” (commonsense) understanding of a person and our “Scientific Image” (or scientific) account.

Images of a Person

Physics has had great success and although the basic categories in physics are in transition still, some of the categorial features of physics have become fairly stable. But on the other hand, when it comes to neurophysiology and neuroscience, although we can go a long way in our explanations with the notions of objects such as neurons, dendrites, synapses, electrochemical processes and the like, we are still at the threshold of the key developments in neuroscience. The contemporary Kantian and pragmatist, Wilfrid Sellars, remarks:

And so the crucial problem that I see with respect to the Scientific Image concerns exactly the relationship of the mental to the physical, of the psychical to the physical ... and therefore, since that is not, as it were, here scientifically, we have to be very clear about what the domain is that we expect to have a better grip on. That is why I developed the Manifest Image idea in order that we could understand the dialectic that has forced scientist and philosopher alike into certain moods concerning the mind-body problem—my ultimate concern was always with the mind-body problem—but I wanted to get clear in my own mind about the status of color, to take one example, and the status of the concept of a sense impression of color. The distinction between the Scientific Image and the Manifest Image was merely a way of indicating the domain that we have some kind of grip on and which we hope to get a better grip on. Now, as I said, the first big event was in the understanding of the physical. And I wanted to indicate that we are tempted to push color out of the physical and into the person and then, as I saw it, the next move is that the Scientific Image tends to take over the person! The Scientific Image tends exactly to reach toward [Physical] Materialism. And I wanted to be clear, then, in my own mind about what it was that was being constantly pushed out! You see, and where it would end up. And that was the reason for introducing the Manifest and Scientific Image. You might put it this way, if we had the Scientific Image then we could philosophize about its conceptual relationships to earlier stages of human thought but we don't have it and therefore we have to be clear about where the puzzles are.¹

Sellars points out that the mind-body problem has evolved into a struggle for survival between images. The Manifest Image is an idealization of the common sense image of humanity. The Scientific Image represents the sum of the changes that science insists that we make to our common sense image. The battle for supremacy turns on the concept of a person.

The Manifest Image: Perceiving

The first “big event” in the understanding of the physical, to which Sellars alludes, expunges from the physical world the very qualities that make life worth living. The change occurs in the 17th century; here is how. On the Aristotelian view, a person is a single unitary subject surrounded by objects that actually possess manifest qualities: color, texture, solidity, scent, sound. Thus, the colored objects of the Aristotelian world view remain colored even in the deepest darkest caves. The first “big event” in the understanding of the physical uproots colors, tastes, sounds, textures, and smells taking them out of objects and putting them into states of a person. Manifest qualities are recategorized from the physical to the psychical. Not only are objects no longer colored in caves, objects have no colors whatever. Although in the Manifest Image, commonsense trees remain green,

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skies blue and sugar sweet, the new scientific image says, “no, they are not.” Descartes’ mechanistic view of the world did not have a place for color. Since color doesn’t make a difference to the behavior of physical objects, it has to go, it doesn’t belong in the real world. For Cartesians, the entire stock of qualities that make the Manifest Image interesting—colors, tastes, sounds, heat and warmth—are taken out of the world and banished to the psychical.

Despite the success of Descartes’ modernism in science and math, familiar ways die hard. To this day, commonsense sees green on the trees and blue in the sky. Commonsense sees the sun rising and setting, air feels warm or cold. As far concerns the common sense in the manifest image, modernism and the Copernican revolution never happened.

The Manifest Image: Thinking

The first “big event” in the understanding of the psychical happened in conjunction with the first big event in the understanding of the physical. “Commonsense thinking,” like “commonsense color,” fared no better. However, appreciating the extent of the revolution in the study of thinking requires a little background.

In the history of the definition of knowledge, the Platonic tradition uses the metaphor of the wise mind that by degrees grows closer and closer to the eternal and immutable until, ultimately, it participates in the harmony that is number. The Platonist uses number as something that exemplifies this kind of harmony because number literally constitutes the kind of relationships that make up whatever it is that is eternal and immutable. And thus, when the Platonism speaks about wisdom and knowing, here we have an approach that provides a recipe for existing. Platonism was a very practical point of view.

After all, if you are talking about recipes for existing, for being happy and living a life full of bliss, for being healthy, well ordered, powerful, immutable and so on, if you are talking about that kind of recipe, everybody is going to be interested in it. For that reason, these notions of what it is to be wise, for example, or the notion of contemplation that comes out of the Platonic tradition, that is why everybody was interested: the tradition delivers a recipe for being here and now.

The Platonic slogan for the good life: follow this recipe and participate in the harmony—knowledge as participation. The Platonic theme goes back to the notion of the role of the forms as involved in knowing. To know something is just like being something. If you want to be square, you have to participate in the form, if you want to know the square, you’ve got to participate in the form. So again, participation becomes a way of being. You can still see the flavor of these notions in terms of our way of talking about enlightenment. What is enlightenment? It is a way of existing, a way of participating in the forms.

The central metaphor for Platonic views on knowing is the notion of participation. The idea of participation becomes enshrined in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition as the view that knowledge consists in the mind becoming like its object: that’s what knowing is. The Aristotelian will give us a theory which is meant to explain how the mind becomes informed by a form. Where the idea of “being informed” is taken quite literally, it means

put into form, formed, fashioned. In this way, the mind participates or becomes like the object itself.

Descartes changes all this. In the first “big event” in the Manifest Image characterization of thinking, Descartes banishes the forms and with them, the only meaningful definition of knowledge that anyone had. Descartes substitutes “representation” for “likeness.” Knowing no longer consists in the mind becoming “like” the object, now the mind must “represent” the object and it can do so without any natural similarity. But, whereas in the Platonic-Aristotelian theories, “likeness” was the end of it because it literally constituted the “knowing,” Descartes introduced an extra step. After all, representations must be presented “to” a viewer, so, they become scenes in the Cartesian theater. To act as the “audience” watching events onstage, Descartes invents “consciousness.” For the first time in history, “consciousness” comes to mean something more than simultaneous or instantaneous introspection. Unfortunately, Descartes never explains anything about this new dimension of experience, or conscience. In fact, although fond of saying what consciousness does, Descartes never says what consciousness is.

Thus, the only definition of knowledge that anyone understood, the Platonic-Aristotelian participation through likeness, gets replaced by an experience, the qualitative dimension of which, consciousness, disallows “likeness” but provides no useful alternative (that has a similar explanatory function). To make matters worse, rather than being embedded participants in our own world-story, the Cartesian variation makes us spectators. Thus, instead of experiencing the “of-ness” of thought immediately (to use Unamuno’s tantalizing phrase), we merely observe it from the outside.

Personality

“Consciousness,” the mark of the mental and the cornerstone of the Cartesian concept of a person, is meant to yield immediate recognition of our own thinking “self”. For the Cartesian, thoughts are the most obvious things that there are in the world. The Cartesian would say,

Well, there’s a special kind of activity of apprehending that gives us access to our thinking. One apprehends the thought that $2+2=4$, a thinking, an episode of thinking that $2+2=4$. In so doing, the nature of the thought and the thinker are revealed.

Furthermore, the nature of the thinker, the thinking and the *thinker* are at least as obvious as $2+2=4$.² They are aspects of our “mindly” experience. One doesn’t have to work to get at the concept of the self, the “I”, the Cartesian *ego*, it is self-revealing: the concept of personality comes for free.

Kantian Variations

The 18th century Enlightenment challenges the Cartesian tradition of thinking. Kant, for example, finds that we are easily misled into believing that thought reveals more about itself than careful analysis warrants. He remarks,

at the ground of this doctrine [of the soul] we can place nothing but the simple and in content for itself wholly empty representation I, of which one cannot even say that it is a concept, but a mere consciousness that accompanies every concept. Through this I, or he, or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thought=x, which is recognized only through [its characteristics], and about which, in abstraction, we can never have even the least concept; because of which we therefore turn in a constant circle, since we must always already avail ourselves of the representation of it at all times in order to judge anything about it; we cannot separate ourselves from this inconvenience, because the consciousness in itself is not even a representation distinguishing a particular object.³

Kant believes that the Cartesian enterprise distorts the project that belongs to his transcendental philosophy. After eviscerating the various interpretations that one can give the Cartesian *I*, Kant concludes on an agnostic note. The being which thinks might be something which is merely a thinking mechanism: self-consciousness of something more than that might be a mere delusion.

Thought

Two unquestioned features in the explanatory framework of commonsense enabled the Cartesian characterization of the *ego* that Kant attacks. But we cannot appreciate Kant's revolutionary view without saying something about the "enablers." In the case of thinking, the "enablers" were Aristotelian and Platonic in origin. The Aristotelian belief in the tripartite soul and the distinction between form and matter were regarded, at the time, as profound explainers. The relationship between form and matter—whether the matter was clay or the human body—was accepted without question and gave rise to complex theories about the non-metaphorical relationship between the two.

The Aristotelian soul had varying degrees of immateriality which made it like body at one end of the scale and like mind at the other end of the scale. When it came to an explanation of thinking, the tradition was decidedly Platonic. No one had ever supplied a better explanation of concept formation than Plato's abstract causality of the forms. The forms, or ideas, exerted a kind of magnetic attraction, the "pull" of the good, so to speak, toward which the immaterial aspect of soul tended to be ineluctably drawn. So, the desire for knowledge was not only the result of what a soul wanted to do, but also a result of what the forms did to the soul.⁴

Naturally, Descartes changes all that. The Cartesian separates consciousness from the body and extirpates the tripartite character from Aristotelian soul. For the Cartesian, body and soul form a unity and behave accordingly.⁵ Descartes however does not have the architectonic of Platonic harmony theory that Suarez (the great scholastic) employs to underwrite the soul/body union. As a result, Descartes must *invent* "consciousness" as that which explains the coordinated activity between mind and body. And so, the dominant metaphor for characterizing meaningful thought (conceptualization) became *representation*.

In the Suarezian harmony theory, this primitive type of directed mental activity made more sense because one was dealing with a soul that was regarded as being more or less immaterial by degrees. As a result, the soul could, so to speak, pay attention to a purely physical aspect of itself (handwise, footwise, and so on) or a purely mental aspect of itself. Contemporary commonsense no longer utilizes degrees of soul: soul is “on” or “off” like a light switch. To put it crudely, although one may speak of being bored to death, for contemporary commonsense, when death really comes, it comes all at once. Descartes deserves all the credit for popularizing the contemporary “all or nothing” characterization of soul. However, the “all or nothing” approach gets him into trouble because the Suarezian scholastic explanation of a harmonious activity between mind and body, upon which Descartes relies, requires the graduated Platonic intermingling of mind and matter that Descartes rejects.

Kant recognizes this. Descartes takes it to be obvious that the “res cogitans” is something of which we have a lucid and undeniably clear concept. That is, we know without question what it is to be a mind. Nothing can be more obvious than what is in our own minds, according to Descartes, it is there shining up at us, ready to be seen. The visualizable certainty of this fact underwrites his argument for the distinction between mind and body: Cartesian dualism.

Kant rejects the Cartesian approach. Kant recounts that at the start of his investigations into the nature of the self, he thought it plausible that we could form a concept of the self merely through the analysis of our own thoughts:

In this way, my insight (so plausible at the start) into the nature of a thinking being, and indeed judged from mere concepts, becomes suspicious, even though I still have not discovered any mistake in it.⁶

Kant’s dissatisfaction with the Cartesian “self apprehension” arises from the fact that an appeal to self-consciousness for an answer to the question “what sort of being is it that represents?” can never be answered by anything more illuminating than “a representer”—not a very illuminating answer. When we ask what sort of being a light bulb is, say, we expect a fairly sophisticated answer in terms of filaments, coatings, Thomas Edison and Joseph Swan—an explanation that draws on the specifics of principles in electrical engineering and so on.

The revolutionary Kantian challenge to the Cartesian concept of the person argues that what we classify when we characterize the nature of the thing that thinks, the “I”, is not an unanalyzable primitive concept but, rather, functional roles made manifest as mental activity.⁷ That is to say, the representational or contentual character of thinking is defined in terms of the semantic activity in which the episodes of thought occur—content or, if you will, “mental meaning” are both manifest in and consist in the roles in reasoning, i.e., in the semantic activity of mental role players. “Mental meanings” are not things or objects—though it is tempting to look at them as such—they are constituted by the dynamic activity of the mind through thinking: the reverberations themselves. In terms that someone like Suarez would have used, the view is that concepts (i.e., *conceivings*) pertaining to thinking are constituted by their role, job or office: they are functional in character and their meaningfulness is expressed through the very

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exercise of the act of thought itself (*in actu exercito*, as Suarez would say). Ideas aren't cognitive episodes *in* which we see things or in which we find meaning. Meaningfulness and understanding consist in the role itself.⁸ Note that Kantian theory bears an ancestral relation to Platonic participation: an idea need not be a thing represented that an inner mental eye gazes upon. No, on the contrary, the ideating is the very representing by which the mind ("I") thinks.

Kant's explicit goal of understanding the concept or, to put it linguistically again, understanding the meaning of a term, involves his view that conceptualization exists as the interrelation among judgments. The view makes sense only in so far as the concept contributes to the fabric of meaning woven from the system of judgment. Thus, in contrast to the doctrine of ideas⁹, Kant wants to set aside the view that a concept or an idea is to be understood as an element that lies somehow outside the cognitive process. During the Counter-reformation and the Renaissance, the view of an idea as something static found a home (in theological circles) as the existence of an Idea in the mind of God. So construed, it readily served as an exemplary cause of a thing (as the idea of the statue in the mind of an artisan serves as the exemplary cause of the statue). Kant implies that views which treat Ideas as things prevent us from ever understanding¹⁰ the nature of thinking.¹¹ Thoughts or thinkings are, on the Kantian view, moments in the semantic activity of language users, meanings in action as it were. "Judgings" do not have meaning independently of one another, they can be only artificially separated from the complex process of getting and asking for reasons, that is, from the inferential web within which they find their existence. To put it less technically, a "mental word" doesn't have content or meaning because it picks out thought parcels, it has meaning because of the role it plays.¹² Mental words aren't "things" at all. They are a convenient way of talking about dimensions of the complex functional process constituting thinking. The popular Science Fiction use of the distributed meaning in the "hive mind" offers cases of narratives popularizing the metaphors pertaining to meaning that Kant struggles to articulate.

Kant and the functional character of thought.

Sellars remarks:

The idea that concepts pertaining to thinking are essentially functional in character raises the question: what non-functional characterization can be given of the processes which embody these functions ... we don't know these processes save as processes which embody these functions. A materialist, in some sense of this protean term, might agree with Kant that concepts pertaining to thought are functional in character, but claim that, although common sense is unable to give a non-functional characterization of thoughts, theoretical science will ultimately do this in terms of neurophysiology.¹³

Naturally, Kant wasn't in the position to see how future science (or fiction) would capitalize on his idea of the functional characterization of thought. The great recategorization of the mental that he anticipated lacked, at the time, the categories necessary to make it a reality. It is an emerging reality today.

It is worth emphasizing that Kant's recategorization of thought brings us back to the Platonic insight. What is the insight? As I remarked earlier, thinking becomes, on this view, participation in the semantic activity of thought. The move is away from Cartesian representationalism and toward the Platonic tradition's emphasis on the aesthetics of consciousness: the Platonic tradition that emphasized enlightenment and knowledge as a manner of "being" rather than a way of representing.

Enablers Again

The new paradigm of thought undermines the view that the contentual character of thought must be construed in terms of ideas which are named or represented by concepts—ultimately ideas in the mind of God. Now thought is to be construed on a dynamic model where it is a system realizing an inferential network, a distributed, decentralized network that is more a process than a discrete thing. On the new paradigm, it is almost certainly the case that what realizes our cognitive economy is entirely distinct from it to the degree that we cannot "see" the process in a manner that allows us to give a meaningful iconical characterization of its presence. The enabler that has been removed through this revolution in thought is the commonsense view that inner perception is a model that can be used to reveal the nature of mentality and of the self. Thus, "inner perception" follows outer perception into museum of metaphors that have served but can serve no longer.

Perception

I have been suggesting that Kant's agnosticism toward the nature of the "self" is a product of the dissolution of the explanatory framework that made Descartes' rationalism possible. That is to say, there were accepted features of commonsense that enabled the Cartesian view. In the case of perception, these "enablers" included the belief in the omni-directional, instantaneous propagation of the species. The species were, for the Thomistic-Aristotelian, the ingredient in the perceptual process that allowed us to make sense of the way in which objects outside us manage to excite our organs of sense. In a commonsense sense, species were eminently plausible. All manner of charming "experiments" supported the existence of species. For example, if one looks into the eyes of another who is, in turn, looking at red flower, the red flower appears in the eye. It was, therefore, easy to conclude that the flower in their eyeball was a "natural likeness" or species that had been transmitted from the flower to the eye. Or, if one pounded a stake on a rock, the vibrations were transmitted instantaneously from one end to the other. It seemed obvious.

Alas, in the Scientific Image, the obvious has been turned upside down. Vibrations don't really travel instantaneously. Vibrations appear to do so because our sensory apparatus and brain are slow. The images don't really come to us, we create them. Naturally, this doesn't prevent most of us from believing in them. How many times do we think to ourselves, after we have finished yawning, "how

interesting that Smith decided to yawn at precisely the same time I did?” Was it coincidence? No. More than likely, our intention to yawn was created as a result of “seeing” Smith at a basic, nonconscious, neural level in advance of our consciously noticing that Smith was yawning. We “save the appearance of our free will” by wrongly experiencing the events as simultaneous. Our commonsense experience of the instantaneous transmission of the visual “enables” our experience that what we are looking at is a real case of simultaneous action. We mobilize our built-in Stalinesque, revisionary historian to retain a sense of “control.”

Now, when the “enablers” of instantaneous transmission evaporate, the plausibility of the Cartesian recategorization of perceptible qualities weakens.¹⁴ The Cartesian view topples when the Scientific Image demonstrates that nothing mental *can* be colored or spatial in the commonsense meaning of “mental,” “color,” and “space.”

A New Framework

The abandonment of the perceptual model both with respect to the outer and inner world threatens to undermine not only common sense but the social institutions that rely upon it.

To put it bluntly, if the mind is more complex than our most powerful computational devices but similar in being defined by processes, then no amount of squinting into our inner metaphysical microscope gives insights into its workings. Such complex, web-like systems hide endless novel possibilities within the combinatorial explosion of links among endlessly interlinked entities. To expect that we can “inspect” this virtual network is as childish as expecting to be able to see how a computer functions by staring at its circuitry.

The Kantian Turn

Kant does not want to rely on the Cartesian notion of “consciousness” because it is based on an unanalysed qualitative dimension of inner experience. In the *Opus postumum*, his final work, Kant considers an alternative answer to the question “what sort of being is it that thinks?”—namely,

a person

where “a person” is construed in terms of the spontaneity of a conceptualizing mind that thins for some purpose.

The new definition puts the concept of a person in the context of teleological-practical reasoning.¹⁵ Reason in its practical aspect provides the context for defining the concept of a person in a manner that goes beyond the Cartesian perceptual model. The Kantian alternative engages the larger context that is “larger” precisely because it involves the concept of a person as itself made possible by the dynamic, distributed, decentralized network that makes up our

multidimensional cognitive economy. Michael Dummett describes this context in the following way,

We have reasonably sharp criteria which we apply in ordinary cases for deciding questions of personal identity: and there are also fairly clear consequences attaching to the settlement of such a question one way or the other, namely those relating to ascriptions of responsibility, both moral and legal, to the rights and obligations which a person has and also to motivation (in the sense that it is ordinarily thought that a person has at least a different kind of motive for securing his own future happiness than for securing that of another). What is much harder is to give an account of the connection between the criteria for the truth of a statement of personal identity and the consequences of accepting it. We can easily imagine people who use different criteria from ours—perhaps as a result of a highly literal belief in reincarnation, or, again, by taking a view of some crucial transition (say an initiation ceremony at puberty) as literally constituting a change of identity. Precisely what would make the criteria they used criteria for *personal identity* would lie in their attaching the same consequence, in regard to responsibility, motivation, [an assertion of personal identity has consequences both for responsibility for past events and for motives in regard to future ones] to their statements of personal identity as we do to ours.¹⁶

Dummett articulates a key feature of the Kantian turn with respect to the study of personality. Sellars puts the point by saying that the concept of personality is bound up to the complex inferential web that defines our understanding of the concept of a person in our ordinary, every day task of getting, giving, and asking for, reasons. Brandom has the following to say about this context:

... in Sellars characterization of expressive rationality, modal claims are assigned the expressive role of inference licenses, which make explicit a commitment that is implicit in the use of conceptual contents antecedently in play. Rules of this sort assert an authority over future practice, and answer for their entitlement both to the prior practice being codified and to concomitant inferential and doxastic commitments. In this way they may be likened to the principles formulated by judges at common law intended both to codify prior practice, as represented by precedent, expressing explicitly as a rule what was it implicit therein, and to have regulative authority for subsequent practice. The expressive task of making material inferential commitments explicit plays an essential role in the reflectively rational Socratic practice of harmonizing our commitments. For a commitment to become explicit is for it to be thrown into the game of giving and asking for reasons as something whose justification, in terms of other commitments and entitlements, is liable to question.¹⁷

The insight in evidence here—that typifies the Kantian turn in the study of personality—is the recognition that “personal identity” is of a piece with the concept of an autonomous agent that engages in “expressive rationality.”¹⁸ Since Kant rejects the Cartesian assimilation of personal identity to the existence of a unique atomic, mental state, he takes the problem of personal identity to be the problem personhood, i.e., personality, where the latter is bound up to the idea of responsibility, motivation and so on, those characteristics that appear to be part of our common sense concept of a person. The revolutionary Kantian notion of

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personal identity takes us outside the rigorous and despotic context of classical metaphysics and places us in the larger context of a mind “thinking to some purpose.” Thus we find ourselves in the domain of practical reason: a realm that includes the normative domain of ideas relating to “ascriptions of responsibility, both moral and legal, to the rights and obligations which a person has” and to our reasonable expectations about what constitutes the autonomous expression of personality in the face of the vicissitudes of changing fortune.

Note that Kant does not tie what it is to be a person (in the context of practical reasoning) to the classical notion of freedom of the will. For the Kantian, freedom of the will is broader than the notion autonomy. Freedom of the will can, after all, involve the spontaneous or capricious development of actions whereas autonomy requires the exercise of measured restraint, “free won’t” rather than “free will.”

The recognition that the contentual character of “personality” is to be understood in terms of its role in the cognitive economy of practical reasoning allows us to begin to see why personality has become such a vexing problem. The endeavor to express the very idea of a person forces us to move to a domain of analysis for which Kant reserved the term *transcendental*. It encompasses the domain in which the conceptual community makes explicit the content-conferring practical and theoretical commitments implicit in asking for reasons and giving reasons for practices. And, at the same time, the transcendental analysis forces us to be conscious of the rules that define the conceptual framework of which our concept of a person is a part.¹⁹

It is a difficult task to articulate the use of concepts within a conceptual framework, it is a far more difficult task to adopt a transcendental viewpoint that seeks to understand the reasons for having adopted the conceptual framework in the first place. The transcendental viewpoint requires that we move outside the conceptual framework that we use: we use the framework as a ladder to climb out of the framework and then attempt to knock over the ladder.

Mechanizing the Magic

Before discussing the direction toward which the transcendental viewpoint turns, let me provide a brief reminder of the “enablers” that made possible the traditional viewpoint rejected by Kant.

The Moderns inadvertently created the problem of personal identity because they rejected the Platonic-Aristotelian concept of the soul as a self-individuating entity that can be present through increasing degrees of spirituality and decreasing degrees of materiality. As explanations became more naturalistic and more humanistic throughout the 16th and 17th century, the desire to explain the capacities of persons solely in terms of intrinsic powers and capacities became greater. Explanations that attempted to augment the resources of a person (for example, by invoking supranatural influence) fell from favor.

The great Aristotelian and Neoplatonic explanatory schemes which began the Renaissance were able to describe, model, and predict the mind and body in extraordinary detail. However, the essentially magical mode of explanation did

not offer a clue how to generate and manipulate concomitant states of the self. The same was true in the case of material stuff. The mechanizing of the magic that characterized the rise of modernism provided working assumptions that functioned well. Modernism prevailed because of what it could *do*.

The extant characterizations of soul were not discarded, no, they suffered a worse fate: ecclesiasticism. After all, driven to its final conclusion, the interaction between soul or form and matter was explained in terms of harmony theory. But harmony theory relied on the acceptability of the notion of harmony and consonance of operation between parts and whole: the microcosm and macrocosm. As more and more specific accounts of behavior were adopted, the Neoplatonic tradition of harmony theory lost ground and fell away.

The Transcendental Turn

Kant, oddly enough, exhibits a great deal of sensitivity to the renaissance and premodern attitude. However his immediate opposition consists of the moderns and mechanistic models of explanation. So, his attacks on concepts of the person, the "I", are directed upon the moderns.

I want to point out that, for the Kantian, the moral point of view overlaps the empirical point of view. Thus, empirical knowability is always knowability by a person here and now where the scope of what is knowable includes facts about the there and then. Knowability involves a dynamic perspectival relationship between the knower and known.²⁰

Thus to admit knowing that it now seems to me that there is a red and triangular object over there is to admit knowing that this was about to seem to me to be the case ... what Kant takes himself to have proved is that the concept of empirical knowledge involves the concept of inferability in accordance with laws of nature. To grant that there is knowledge of the here and now is, he argues, to grant that there are general truths of the sort captured by law like statements.²¹

Sellars goes on to remark that one does not acquire piecemeal knowledge of the world

This difficult doctrine requires that the logical powers of the concept ... involve not only the inferential powers characteristic of its role as the predicate of full-fledged judgment, but also the powers involved in constructing...ordinary determinate [this-such] representings in accordance with a rule, and knowing that that is what one is doing ... To be able to have intuitive representings, then, is to have all the conceptual apparatus involved in representing oneself as acquiring empirical knowledge of a world one never made.²²

The revolutionary idea is quite general: the point-of-viewishness of experience is constitutive of the "I think." The "expressive task of making inferential commitments explicit plays an essential role in the reflectively rational Socratic practice of harmonizing our commitments" about what constitutes personality. Such a task is, as Kant saw, a complex transcendental one. So, the radical departure from the Cartesian "I think" requires a consciousness that is a multidimensional self-positing (because it involves layers upon layers of commitments and obligations) in a dynamic, distributed inferential process.

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When one adopts the transcendental point of view, one comes to see that the “I” that is this unity of experience is nothing more than the unfolding sequence of these representings. For the Kantian, if anything is to be an object for us here and now, we must have all the conceptual apparatus involved in representing ourselves as acquiring knowledge of the world—an empirical world brought about through the inferential economy by which we come to be in the world in the first place. The unity of experience arises through the unity of my thinkings about myself in a world that includes the self. Transcendentally, the self and the unfolding sequence of my representations are the same thing.

As I understand the Kantian legacy, it argues that the knowledge of oneself is knowledge of an I which constitutes itself as a principle and as its own originator.²³ Thus from the transcendental point of view the self thinking itself thereby makes itself into a person.

To put it another way, Kant wants to claim that the generation of perspective, that is to say, the generation of what the world is for me here–now as it is, constitutes what it is for me to regard myself as a person and author of the world. As a pragmatic matter, I see myself as legislative because I learn to anticipate what others do, to rely on what others do, to hope for what others do because I come to occupy their perspective in the very process of defining my own.

Kant regards moral rules as possessing a bindingness upon us, and an internal obligation that arises as a result of constituting a certain point of view. And so he says,

Among all the characteristics that pertain to a thinking being, the first is that of being conscious of oneself as a *person*; that is in accordance with such, the subject – according to transcendental idealism – constitutes itself a priori into Object, not as given in appearance... but as the being which frames itself and is its own creator, by the quality of personality: the “I am.” “I,” as human, am a sensible object in space and time, and at the same time Object of understanding to myself. “I am a person” consequently, a moral being that has rights.²⁴

The empirical point of view contains the idea of an “I think” having power in relation to the objects of sense, the moral point of view contains the idea of a person having such power, one who can encounter wrong or can consciously do it and “to know both can be done by others.” The essential point is that the empirical viewpoint is an ingredient in the moral-practical viewpoint.

The Next Recategorization

As Sellars notes, the challenge for the Scientific Image is to come up with “the concept of nature, which not only finds a place for reasons and causality of reason but also for the autonomy of reason and the reality of the moral point of view.”²⁵ If the Scientific Image is going to augment commonsense, it must free itself from the legacy of Cartesian mechanism.

Contrary to the Cartesian concept of personality, Sellars remarks:

In the manifest image, our concept of a person is not the concept of something of which the behavior can be assimilated to the triggering off of causal properties in the interaction of material things. Persons acquire second natures, in the literal

sense, dispositions. But their first nature is not that of a system of causal properties, dispositions in a metaphorical sense, but rather that of a system of capacities pertaining to the various modes of thinking.²⁶

So, while persons in their “second” nature may find a home in the causal explanations of the Scientific Image, persons in their “first” nature cannot...as yet. In the context of the contemporary philosophical tradition, we can find a sketch of the way to reconcile the manifest or common sense image of a person as a system of capacities pertaining to modes of thinking with the scientific image of a person. To do so, one must first grant the existence of the type of causal network required for the scientific person—to deny it is analogous to rejecting the Copernican revolution. However, the Manifest or commonsense concept of a person involves episodes evolving into dispositions and creating a system of capacities pertaining to modes of thinking that, while episodic in character, do not merely consists of actions—in which case, they are destined to be homeless in the Scientific Image.²⁷

The modern pragmatist tells us that the Manifest or Commonsense Image drives us in the construction of a map which is adequate for a purpose, and that allows us to select between competing alternatives.²⁸ We adopt foundational principles of a theory that we find acceptable because of what the theory allows us to do. Accepting theories is, then, bound up with practical reasoning: “in other words we try to show that there is a good and sufficient practical argument of which the conclusion is ‘I (or we) shall accept the theory’”²⁹

As a result, practical reasoning in the moral point of view no less than practical reasoning in the scientific point of view is going to be tied to the ends in view from which we start our reasoning. The concept of a person belongs to the moral point of view. Thus for some end, E, we endorse rules of criticism or committive rules by virtue of which we adopt a normative stance and in which we undertake obligations that provide us with practical arguments whose conclusions concern what “ought-to-be”.³⁰ Our practical reasoning constitutes a map that allows us to successfully negotiate our ever-changing social space. The moral point of view emerges as, then, a dimension of ethical-teleological practical thinking.³¹

The Kantian challenge is clear enough, if one wishes to grant empirical knowability then one grants the existence of practical reason. In which case, one accepts a concept of a person. The reflective point of view (Kant’s transcendental perspective) attempts to articulate the ends in view that have been adopted to give our concept of personality the character it has.

However, once the Manifest Image reaches out to identify the multidimensional texture of the inferential economy that gives life to the domain of practical reason and hence, to the concept of a person, the Manifest Image exhausts its explanatory resources. The Manifest Image leads us up to a point which it cannot go beyond, namely, *somehow*, in *someway*, the spontaneity involved in autonomy must be part of the phenomenology of experience. Unfortunately, the very nature of the pure processes involved appears to put them beyond the explanatory reach of our current system of metaphors.³² The

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Humanities must struggle to renew the metaphors that will define the concept of a person for the century.

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¹"Symposium on Materialism," 1970, an unpublished lecture to be included in the second edition of *Philosophical Perspectives*, (Forthcoming, Ridgeview, 2005)

²See *Metaphysics of Epistemology*, 279ff. for the self-evident.

³B404;A346, *Critique*.

⁴As scholastics understood, Aristotelian abstraction could never make sense of the necessary guidance of consciousness without appealing to an act in collect whose activity was supplemented in some way by either the divine mind, Grace, or the influence of the active intellect.

⁵See my *Mechanizing the Magic*, for a detailed discussion, (forthcoming, 2005).

⁶A399, *Critique*.

⁷A400, *Critique*, see Sellars, "...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks..." §20.

⁸Brandom, in discussing Sellars' good Kantian inferentialism, remarks, "It is at this point that Sellars introduces his central thought: that response to have *conceptual* content is just for it to play a role in the inferential game of making claims and giving an asking for reasons. To grasp or understand such a concept is to have practical mastery over the inferences it is involved in—to know, in the practical sense of being able to distinguish (a kind of know-*how*), what follows from the applicability of a concept, and what it follows from." *Articulating Reasons*: 48.

⁹Following Suarez, the doctrine of ideas inherited by Descartes was known as the doctrine formal concepts.

¹⁰B141, *Critique*

¹¹Compare Brandom, 124ff.

¹²Brandom 159 and Sellars, "...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...", §13ff].

¹³"...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...", §21.

¹⁴The list of "enablers" is not exhaustive. Others are at work behind the scene such as the nature of tripartite soul, echoes of some of the more popular axioms from Proclus' *Theology* and, of course, Descartes' beautiful algebraized geometry provided an alternative to representation by similarity.

¹⁵"...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...", §67.

¹⁶Dummett, p. 358, the bracketed section appears on 455.

¹⁷Brandom, p. 76.

¹⁸To make Autonomy "under the law to be the foundation of the determination of one's action." *O.p.* XXII, 121-122, p. 626ff. The notion of freedom as restraint (or constraint under law).

¹⁹"Some Reflections on Thoughts and Things," §40ff.

²⁰"Towards a Theory of Categories," part VIII, §51ff.

²¹"Toward a Theory of Categories," part VIII, §53-54, TKM, 338.

²²"Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience," part VI-VII, §35-36ff. in *Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics*, 279.

²³*O.p.*, XXI,14, 638

²⁴*O.p.*, XXI,14, 638. See also, *O.P.* XXII,56, 613.

²⁵"...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...", §87, in *Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics*, 362.

²⁶"Metaphysics and the Concept of a Person," in *Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics*, 304.

²⁷The idea that all mental episodes are actions and therefore caught in the empirical web of science, is a hidden "enabler" put in place by Descartes and exploited by subsequent Moderns. After all, one of the central criticisms that the great scholastic Suarez gives against Aristotelian abstraction is that abstraction as a means to underwrite concept formation rests upon the incoherence of assimilating the episodic character of mental actuality's (or "acts" for short) to physical material events.

²⁸"On Accepting First Principles," in *Kant's Transcendental Metaphysics*, 452.

²⁹ “On Accepting First Principles,” in *Kant’s Transcendental Metaphysics*, 447.

³⁰ Brandom, 193.

³¹ O.p., XXII, 115ff., 622.

³² For an attempt at finding new metaphors, see Sellars’ discussion in “...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...”, section 58.