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4 – Tetsuro Watsuji

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Re-Constructing the Self Within Objective Reality

Tetsuro Watsuji, in his quote from *Fudo*, suggests that although human existence is limited by nature, subjected to nature's laws and susceptible to the effects of the environment, there still can be a human *self*, which has the ability to "understand" itself – by not being a separate entity that is disjointed from nature, but through nature. This rephrasing of the quote immediately challenges some of the widely-held assumptions of philosophy, including dualistic thinking where substance and spirit (sometimes referred to as self) co-exist as different elements of being, and it poses a crucial question: How can a self, or a subject that comes to the discovery of understanding itself as a *self*, arise within the boundaries of objective reality, or natural *phenomenon*? What is this *self*, and how does it express itself? Then what is *self-discovery*? Is it an epistemological search for the truth of self, or is it a much more complex *process* of veridiction? Finally, if a self comes to the understanding of itself, can it change itself, and can it amount to change in objective reality? In the framework set by these questions, I will try to draw different opinions from philosophy, genetics, neuroscience and psychology, in order to deconstruct our notion of concepts like *self*, *subject* and *self-knowledge*, and finally posit my own suggestion of a modern-day understanding of the underlying assumptions of Watsuji's quote.

I want to start off by delineating some of my assumptions and my reasoning for these assumptions. I believe philosophy is responsible for the engineering of concepts and that convoluted concepts such as *subject* and *freedom* has to be re-formulated in a pragmatic way that can have an effect in actuality by promoting *self-agency*. What I mean by self-agency is that the individuals ability to amount to some change oneself and its surroundings. Unfortunately, even within political activists, there is a discourse of conspiracy, in which all rationalizations are attached to an ingraspable entity (he who has control over the conspiracy) and self-responsibility for the situation of things are forsaken. Therefore, any conceptualization of *subject* and *freedom* has to promote the individual's potential to act on things. Although these conceptualizations may not be the absolute and definite truths, they

should be accepted as pragmatic truths and shown to be naturally viable – which I will do in the rest of the essay. As Immanuel Kant has expressed if its necessary it is possible. Also, as Saul Kripke has expressed in analytical terms of modal logic, if something is necessary, its possibility is also necessary.

Alain Badiou has once written that “For every 20th century French philosopher, there is another Descartes.” Badiou’s statement was in light of the philosophical question between object and subject, and the question of self that arises through the former. In popular philosophical textbooks, Descartes is coronated as the ‘father of the modern subject.’ I suggest this is simply not true. It is true that the conception of the subject was crucial for the Enlightenment (although it carries the meta-ontological baggage of dualism in which substance and self are separated), yet it is not true that Descartes invented it. As Michel Foucault shows in his seminars at College de France focused on *Government and the Self* and his essay *Technologies of the Self*, what is called the self is a set-of-practices that historically roots all the way back to Greek *polis*. Therefore, what is called the self and its subjecthood should not be taken for granted as something that ontologically *is*. The concept self is historically a set of practices that gives the guidelines of how to construct and form oneself as a moral subject. What Foucault means by ‘the technologies of self’ is these practices – *tekhne* (the etymological root of technology) is how these practices are referred to in ancient Greek. What was aimed through this *tekhne* was to guide the individual into *ethos*, the formation of the moral subject. Thus, in the search for a pragmatic conception of self-agency, viewing the self as a set of practices as that forms the individual into a moral subject opens up many possibilities.

Following Foucault in the framework of my questions in the introduction, finding the historical connections of *self-knowledge* is also necessary. Foucault refers to this by analyzing the first of the Platonic dialogues between Alkibiades and Socrates and posits the need to differentiate between two maxims: *gnothi sautou* (know yourself) and *epimeleai sautou* (take care of yourself). What is compelling is that the questioning Socrates uses is not directly aimed as asking Alkibiades to know himself, but to first taking care of himself and then coming to the knowledge of his self through the practice of taking care of himself. Again, the self is not an object of direct epistemological inquiry or ontological certainty, it is a quality that is attained through a set of practices.

The question arises: what is the truth that is known or discovered if self is merely a set of practices and therefore a non-stationary thing that is subject to change? To answer this question, our conception of knowledge also has to be problematized. The most important distinction is accounting for a truth that is non-stationary, that is constantly in the making. Alain Badiou sees truth not as a stationary statement but a process of ‘becoming.’ In his *Being and Event* he describes how a subject ‘makes’ truth (a generic set which will never

be completed but have statements of fact in which can account for a truth-system) after a potential is unleashed by an event that is unexplainable by former sets of knowledge. The subject only arises when such a potential is unleashed and only becomes a subject if it manages to 'make' truth. To understand Badiou, we must look at Heidegger as well. Heidegger makes a distinction between *alethia* (truth) and *tekhne* (knowledge). *Alethia* is not a matter that can only be derived from epistemology; it is within the domain of ontology. It is a process of 'becoming' and is connected to 'making' (*poiesis*). Heidegger uses the unconventional word *Wesen* (which's direct translation is *Essencing*) to describe the becoming of being and its potency to remain as it is in a world that is in constant flux and rising entropy. Thinking back to Aristotle, essence was a material's intrinsic potential (*dunamis*), which could be actualized (*entelechia*) to reach its essence. It could also be actualized in a different way and attain a different form, but this would be just an accidental-form, not an essential-form. 'Essencing' in Aristotle was the potential of a material to actualize into its essential *telos*. In Heidegger, essencing is a subject's ability make itself (*poiesis*) a form and staying as a form in intersubjective reality. In this case the form is truth; the subject is the self that is trying to reach/make its truth. The way these definitions and mode of thinking connect to the former discussions of this essay lies in the Ancient Greek term: *ethopoiesis*.

Ethopoiesis is the aim of the practice of the self: the making of the moral subject by the self's taking care of itself. Michel Foucault, sheds light on this term on his analysis of the Platonic Dialogues of Socrates after his confrontation with the Oracle Delphi, in which he goes about Athens and tests anyone he can find about their knowledge of themselves. Socrates inquires them about the following: *phronesis* (their reasoning), *alethia* (their truths) and *psukhe* (the psyche, the soul, the form and the emergent property of our biological counterparts in a modern sense). His aim is to test their reasons, thus challenge their truths, and thus to amount to some change in their being. But this change in their soul, or the psyche, is not made directly by Socrates, but by the the subject itself. Therefore, as the subject reconstitutes its being, the truths, and finally, the reasons follow in the process of making. It is intriguing that Socrates utilizes the modern psychological phenomenon *cognitive dissonance*, in which reason and belief of truths about oneself clash and the psyche is disturbed, in a pragmatic way. Back in Ancient Greece, this process, or the subject-reconstituting itself, was called *ethopoiesis*. *Ethos* (formation of the moral subject through practices of the self) and *ethopoiesis* (the subject's ability to understand the self and discover its truths while also changing them) is therefore crucial in a current-day conceptualization of the self and the subject, as well as the understanding of Tetsuro Watsuji's quote.

It is now proper to return back to our original questions: 'How can a self, or a subject that comes to the discovery of understanding itself as a *self*, arise within the boundaries of

objective reality, or natural *phenomenon*?' In his book *Absolute Recoil*, Slavoj Žižek asks a similar question regarding the transcendental, Kantian subject who is autonomous, but is totally submerged in objective reality. His reasoning while answering this question involves Kant's *incorporation thesis* ('incorporate your intentions into your maxims while acting), which Žižek rephrases into context as such: 'We are determined by causes, but we retroactively determine which causes will determine us.' According to Žižek, autonomy in action is not before the action, but how its intentions and rationales are incorporated in retrospect. This allows autonomous subjecthood to be conceptualized, especially when the process of *ethopoiesis* is thought. But is this naturally viable? Thinking in the framework of neuroscience and linguistics one could try to synthesize the Whorf hypothesis and neural plasticity. The Whorf hypothesis states that the structure of the brain, therefore its processes, are highly influenced by language. But language of a subject is produced by the neural processing that is highly influenced by language. Therefore, the brain that is effected by the language can recursively use language to influence itself, therefore changing its own form, and thus its use of language as well. To explore this question further in a similar vein, I will be discussing a fairly new field of genetics that is on the rise, *epigenetics*.

Genetics and our genomic sequence is usually thought of as the *a priori*, axiomatic data that determines the traits and habits of an individual. However, the ratio of the whole genomic sequence that is responsible for this is only 1.5%. The other 98.5% of the genetic data were thought to be non-sensical because they were mostly repetitive, but recent scientific progress revealed that this enormous part of the genomic sequence is crucial to its function. These parts are actively involved in the process of how that 1.5% is expressed by managing the folding of the DNA, the half-life of mRNAs, the process of DNA methylation which can switch off some genes etc. and how the cell as a whole is differentiated (the genomic sequence of a neuron cell and a nose-cell are the same, after all.) In other words, our genetic axioms constantly gets reconstituted. It was also demonstrated by the 2015 Nobel Prize for Chemistry Winner Aziz Sancar that DNA is exposed to thousands of spontaneous changes each second and these changes' regulatory processes are also connected how the genes are expressed. Randomness is a major constituent of this process, yet randomness takes place in a hormonal background. The hormonal background creates a set of possibility, a potential, which then gets actualized by randomness. The spontaneous changes are the eventual subset of the potential set, which is the hormonal background and that hormonal background can be consciously changed by how a subject feels, thinks or acts. The subject has the potential power to alter the way it gets constituted by re-constituting its own genetic axioms. This is a possible scientific way to show the subject's role in science and to account for a natural viability for the incorporation thesis.

I feel the need to make a separate case of scientific modeling to elucidate the concepts of potential and actual and the subject's role in it. An evolutionary geneticist has

once said that there may be two reasons to explain why a certain species never came to exist: 1. Natural selection, 2. The necessary mutation never occurred. Before natural selection acts on a population, the population gains multiplicity and diversity by mutation. Thus, a potential of multiplicity is created. Natural selection serves to actualize this potential into creating new species in the tree of life. As Daniell Dennet explains in his *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, every possible outcome in the potential is not actualized, but actualization could not occur without potential deeming it possible. The subject's effect in actuality in epigenetics is on constituting the potential. Likewise, the ethical subject's effect in actuality is the formation and re-constitution of its *ethos*. *Ethos* is not directly concerned with behaviour or the knowledge of whether the action at the time of acting is right or wrong. It is concerned with building an ethical potential that, at the time of action, effects how the subject behaves. It is not knowledge of behaviour, but how to behave. To make it clearer, I will apply Michel Foucault's distinction between two kinds of knowledge: *savoir* and *connaissance*. John Grottes makes the same distinction in 1865 and includes the two words' German correlates: *wissen* and *kennen*. *Savoir*, and *wissen*, are direct knowledge of things, and is more connected to epistemology. *Connaissance*, and *kennen*, is more of a sense of knowledge. If knowing a theory is *savoir*, knowing the theories underlying assumptions and employing its methods is *connaissance*. The knowledge that can be gained to understand the underlying assumptions is *savoir of connaissance*. In a similar way, knowledge on the actual events and behavior in ethics is *savoir*. Knowledge on the potentiality of these events and *ethos* is *connaissance*. Practicing knowledge, *tekhne*, on the moral formation of the self, *ethos*, is *savoir of connaissance*. The practice of the self is the practice of building potential. A clear example would be as such: As a participant in this philosophy Olympiad, I didn't know which quotes would be given, this was beyond my control, however, in order to actualize a written essay, I had to build up a potential of philosophy which would get actualized after the contingent quotes were given. Here, my act of learning philosophy, is *savoir of connaissance*. In a wider sense, our formations as selves able to actualize in subjecthood, is built through the practice of education – not only technical education, but of self and truth formation.

A new question arises from these discussions: If the practice of self and subjecthood is naturally viable and the individual can be cultivated by cultivating its potential within objective reality, where does the self stand on amounting to any social change, and therefore, changing not only itself, but its environment? In the Greek *polis*, Socrates had argued that through the moral formation of the self, the self would morally get involved in society. However, as Foucault analyzes, in the transition into Hellenistic, and then the Christian culture, the *tekhne* of the self had changed to argue for the individual's withdrawal from society, even the world. What is the modern dynamic for this? It is widely held that 'No man is an island.' Foucault even argues that through discourse that is more focused on the individual, the individual is totally suppressed within systems of politics, economics and language. However, if Kantian autonomy and pragmatic self-agency is viable, restoring the

individual into systems of thought is possible to be managed. But can an individual unit that determines itself still have effect on the system as a whole? I would like to approach this question through the Hilbert-Frege debate on whether the content of individual words on a statement can alter its form and structure. Hilbert supports that it doesn't; Frege claims that it does. The same debate is at the heart of cognitive science. Connectionists who use a model, in which individual units are not important and the whole cognition process is done through the connections of the individual units. Some who are favoring the computational model of cognition assume the side of Frege claims that the individual units should have an effect on the general form. I see a similar discrepancy in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, who writes in an essay on Hume, 'We are our habits, and nothing but our habits.' Which is similar to the connectionist approach, but who also is one of the main advocates of self-agency in contemporary materialism. A phenomenon called the Baldwin effect in genetics may offer an answer. Baldwin effect delineates a process in which, individuals in a society are able to detect a mutation in a individual unit, and if this mutation favors this unit, they may imitate the adaption to secure a population change for the good. Even in a connectionist way, units may have potential, as neurons who are genetically differentiated do, and change the form. Likewise, a subject who is within objective reality, may practice to be a self and change its surroundingd.