

SYMPOSIUM

What Kinds of Practice are Necessary for Self-Consciousness?

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Abstract

The Practical Self offers a new and gripping account of the conditions on being self-conscious subjects. Gomes argues that self-conscious subjects are required to have faith in themselves as the agents of thinking, sustained and supported by worldly practices. I argue that that Gomes leaves open either theoretical or alternative practical grounds to justify being the agents of thinking and so does not motivate an appeal to faith as the mode of assent. And I ask whether we can make available an alternative account of the tight relation between communal practices and self-consciousness that preserves it, absent faith.

Keywords: self-consciousness; practical; objectivity; self; Kant

The Practical Self is a book that, as the title suggests, engages with the practical. What is not contained in the title, but is compellingly illustrated in Anil Gomes' text, is that the focus on "practical" is three-fold. As Gomes argues, questions about the self are practical because what it is to be self-conscious is tied to recognizing your self as an *agent*, as opposed to a patient, of thought. They are practical because this recognition is grounded in *practical*, as opposed to theoretical, reasons and requirements. And they are practical because these reasons and these requirements are intimately tied to our daily and worldly *practices*.

Gomes elegantly weaves together these three senses of practical to motivate, in the spirit of the Cartesian and Kantian projects he takes as guiding lights, an account of the relation between the self, or self-consciousness, and knowledge of an objective world. Motivating such an account, to whatever degree we can absent either an appeal to God or an appeal to idealism, is Gomes' central concern in the book. We must understand the *practical self*, argues Gomes, in order to make sense of this as a genuine relation. The text follows this framework. We begin with the self-world relation. Lacking a satisfying account of this relation, we turn to think more about the self-consciousness: our understanding and recognition of it. And it is on properly developing our understanding of our self-consciousness that we can use these considerations to motivate a return to, and comprehension of, the relation between the self and the world.

I focus here on the arguments that take us from each stage to the next: that is, the argument that prompts a renewed look at the self and the nature of our self-consciousness, and then the argument that takes us from this self back to the world. Each step, as Gomes argues for them, involves a commitment to one of the three kinds of "practical" that I outlined above: my comments concern the strength and nature of the commitment to the practical in each of these stages. In the first instance, I argue that we do not yet have sufficient motivation to leave behind theoretical or alternative practical grounds for knowledge of our self-consciousness. In the second, I ask whether

we can strengthen the commitment to worldly practices and the role of community in our account of self-consciousness.

1. A Challenge for an Account of Self-Consciousness

The Practical Self offers an account of the nature of and conditions on being self-conscious subjects, and the way that meeting these conditions relates us—these self-conscious subjects—to an objective world. Gomes argues that self-conscious subjects are required to have *faith*—a particular kind of practical assent—in themselves as the agents of thinking. This faith is, in turn, sustained and supported by worldly practices (in particular, the practice of holding each other accountable for our views and judgements); hence, the relation to the world.

Why do we need to appeal to this faith in order to account for the relation between self-consciousness and objectivity? In the first instance, it is because our best attempts to offer an account of the connection between the self and the world fall short. Projects like that of Descartes and Kant that aim to secure a genuine relation between self-consciousness and an objective world must rely on controversial metaphysical premises (God, or idealism) in order to do so. And, as Gomes convincingly argues in Chapter 2, strategies that purport to depart from such premises by arguing that the relation need not be a *genuine* one (that is, a relation where each of the relata really exists) but only a relation of intentional directedness, are no less complicated and no more successful than the ambitions of Descartes and Kant (Gomes, 2024, 71). We struggle to offer a satisfying explanation of the connection between the self and the world, whether that connection is construed in terms of how the world must actually be, or in terms of how we must experience the world.

Luckily, there is a way forward. In order to appreciate the solution, though, we must first get a handle on a problem for the nature of self-consciousness. This problem comes from Lichtenberg, who contends that an isolated self-conscious thinker lacks the resources to even formulate “I am thinking.” In Lichtenberg’s own words:

We become conscious of certain representations that do not depend on us; others, at least we believe, depend on us; where is the boundary? We know only the existence of our sensations, representations and thoughts. One should say *it is thinking*, just as one says, *it is lightning*. To say *cogito* is already too much as soon as one translates it as I am thinking. (Lichtenberg, 2012, K76)

Gomes insightfully shows that Lichtenberg’s challenge should be understood as the claim that the thinker lacks the resources to distinguish between thoughts in which she is the *agent*, and thoughts in which she is the *patient*.¹ There is no principle available to her to demarcate thoughts that are determined externally and strike her as if a bolt of lightning, from those thoughts for which she is at least the partial determining ground.

Call this Lichtenberg’s Challenge for Self-Consciousness: self-consciousness depends on the subject recognizing themselves as the agent of their thinking.

This claim immediately needs both specifying and qualifying, because Gomes argues that it is only a particular form of self-consciousness—what he calls *deliberative self-consciousness*—that is in contention on Lichtenberg’s challenge. Basic self-consciousness—the ability to recognize your thoughts and experiences as your own—is possible even absent the thought of one’s self as the agent of these thoughts and experiences. Deliberative self-consciousness, on the other hand, is *both* the recognition of your own thoughts and experiences (parsed as your own perspective) *and* the

¹ Contrasted to a popular interpretation of Lichtenberg that takes his challenge to be that the Cartesian meditator only has the resources to attest to the existence of an episode of thinking, *not* to the existence of a “located self”, a minimal metaphysical subject of these thoughts (see, e.g., Parfit, 1984). Gomes, noting Lichtenberg’s appeal to knowledge of the existence of “our” sensations, points out that he seems committed to a located self even as he raises his challenge (Gomes 78).

thinking of the subject of that perspective as the possible agent of mental activity. This kind of self-consciousness is really what is at the heart of our philosophical projects, since it is the kind of self-consciousness that is evidenced or actualized in the—conscious and comprehended—evaluation of our perspective.

It is this deliberative self-consciousness that would not be possible, Gomes argues, if we did not take ourselves to the agent of thinking (Gomes, 2024, 99). This gives us the version of Lichtenberg's Challenge with which Gomes is concerned with responding. In order to explain our deliberative self-conscious thought, we must account for how and why we are epistemically entitled to recognize ourselves as the agents of our thinking.

The remainder of Gomes' argument takes this as a jumping-off point, as follows. On such an understanding of the challenge, it becomes clear that the only way to account for this condition on self-consciousness is by appeal to practical reason. And it is this appeal to practical reason that makes available a new source of connection between self-consciousness and objectivity. The problem, or puzzle, of the relation between self-consciousness and the world is solved in virtue of resolving this challenge.

I turn now to the details of the first of these steps: how do, and can, we justify the claim 'I am the agent of my thinking'?

2. Is Practical Assent the Only Way Forward?

I call the claim that I am the agent of my thinking the Agential Claim.

Gomes considers four options for justifying our assent to the Agential Claim: (i) experience, (ii) *a priori* conceptual analysis, (iii) transcendental arguments, and (iv) practical assent. (i) through (iii) are presented as grounds rooted in theoretical reason. (iv) is rooted in practical reason.

Gomes argues, in both the end of Chapter 3 and the beginning of Chapter 4, that this set of theoretical justificatory options will not meet the challenge. Theoretical grounds *cannot* justify my entitlement to hold that I am the agent of my thinking.²

Given this, the only available route is (iv): explaining how our recognition of ourselves as the agent of our thinking is a form of practical assent. In so doing, we follow Lichtenberg's own prescription: that "to assume the I, to postulate it, is a practical requirement." Our status as the agents of our thinking is, Gomes argues, a matter of *faith*—that is, it is a matter of a particular kind of technical and significant practical assent.

The kind is technical because it necessarily depends on two conditions. It is significant because the content of both of these conditions is quite demanding. One has practical reasons to assent to a claim if and only if both of the following are met.

C1. The claim is *theoretically undecidable*: "there could not be theoretical reasons to endorse or deny the claim".

C2. The claim is *practically required*: "assenting to the claim is a rational requirement, on the pursuit of ends that we are required to set". (Gomes, 2024, 118)

As I said, both conditions are demanding. The latter appeals to a practical *requirement*. The former appeals to the *impossibility* of giving theoretical reasons. That is, it is not sufficient, I take it, to satisfy C1 that I lack theoretical reasons, or you lack theoretical reasons, but it must be such that theoretical reasons are *in principle unavailable for the claim*.

Gomes discusses a range of worries about the weakening of C2: that is, what would happen if the claim under consideration is not a *requirement*. This, he writes, would be mere wishful thinking,

²"Our status as agents does not show up in our experience of the world. And there is nothing conceptually incoherent about the idea that we might be the mere passive recipients of all our thoughts." (102)

and offers a range of reasons for why the Agential Claim *can* meet the condition in its strongest form (Gomes, 2024, 119–132).³ Here, I ask the same set of question for C1: does the Agential Claim meet the strong version of C1 with its strong version of the theoretical undecidability requirement?

I argue that it cannot. Let me get one more piece on the table before I do so. As I read it, the following assumption is in the background of Gomes' argument that we must practically assent to the Agential Claim: the four options listed above as reasons for our assent are exhaustive. That is, if the three theoretical routes cannot be taken, the only path that lies before us is the path of practical reason, and the only path for practical reason is practical assent understood as this technical notion of faith. In other words: if we cannot justify our claim via the first three routes, then we foreclose *knowledge* of the claim.

Gomes' claim that we must practically assent to the claim that we are agents of our thinking relies, then, on the fact (a) that we have foreclosed all theoretical options, and (b) that the only route for practical justification is practical assent (that these options are exhaustive).

I take it that both (a) and (b) are involved in satisfying C1. In what follows, I challenge each of these in turn. I argue, first, that there are ways of construing Lichtenberg's Challenge and its resultant demand for justification that reintroduces the possibility of theoretical options. Second, that there are ways of construing Lichtenberg's Challenge and its resultant demand for justification that introduce alternative practical routes for rational justification.

In so doing, I do not aim to present decisive arguments in favor of alternative ways of assenting to the Agential Claim. My aim instead is to draw attention to the availability of other options for justifying this assent. The availability of these alternative options is, I argue, enough to weaken the satisfaction of a condition that requires that there *could not* be knowledge-based reasons to endorse or deny the claim in which we have faith.

2.1. Available theoretical options: Agential self-consciousness without deliberation

To get a grip on theoretical reasons left overlooked, let us return to the Lichtenberg Challenge, and return to Gomes' claim that the challenge is only a challenge for a particular form of self-consciousness, namely, deliberative self-consciousness. In so arguing, Gomes holds that we *can* be *self-conscious*, just not deliberatively so, absent a grip on ourselves as the agents of our thinking. Because of this, he takes it that theoretical arguments for the basic nature of self-consciousness, either from experience or from concepts, will not suffice to explain the claim that we are agents.

I propose that we can understand Lichtenberg's Challenge as targeting the fact that we have grounds for assenting to our self-consciousness *at all*. This strengthens the challenge but likewise strengthens our response. Here is how this goes.

Self-consciousness is the capacity to recognize one's thoughts and experiences as one's own: that is, the capacity to recognize your perspective on the world, or, to self-ascribe experiences. Gomes argues that it is not, and cannot be, a condition on self-ascription that subjects think of themselves as the agents of the experience they self-ascribe. I can, for example, take it that my experience of it raining outside, or the scrap of a song that just came into my head, are happening *to* me, not generated *by* me. All that is required for these thoughts is that I take myself to be the location, or unified subject, of the experience or thought.

This seems clearly right: you can think of yourself as having an experience without thinking about yourself as the agent of this experience. But, I argue, this is only one half of the process of self-ascription, and only one of two things that we are getting at when we say that someone is self-conscious.

When you recognize your thoughts as your own, two things are happening. One, there are experiences that you self-ascribe. Two, you are ascribing these experiences *to* yourself. And while

³He holds (119) that the previous chapter's considerations sufficiently motivate the theoretical undecidability of the Agential Claim and so its satisfaction of C1.

the first does not require that you think of yourself as the agent, the second does. In other words, you can think of yourself as having an experience without thinking about yourself as the agent of *the experience*. But you *do* have to think of yourself as the agent of your *ascription*. You can be the patient of the experience, but insofar as you self-ascribe this experience, you are the agent of the ascription.

If what it is to be self-conscious is to recognize your perspective (thoughts and experiences) as your own, and what it is to recognize your perspective as your own is to self-ascribe these experiences, and self-ascription involves both the *having* of the experience and the *act* of the ascription, then it is not the case that you can be self-conscious without having a grip on yourself as the agent of your thinking. At a minimum, you must recognize yourself as the agent of ascription. To recognize one's thoughts and experiences involves recognizing oneself as the agent of one's thinking.

Lichtenberg's challenge, then, should be taken in its strongest version: it is a challenge to self-consciousness, generally (or what I call basic self-consciousness). Self-consciousness depends on the subject recognizing themselves as the agent of their thinking: insofar as we cannot so recognize, we cannot understand self-consciousness.

In recognizing the strong version of the challenge, though, we should likewise recognize that we might have good, and distinctively theoretical, grounds for response.

Here is one way that theoretical reasons come back into the picture on this understanding. I've described this as an inseparably two-part process: (1) having an experience that you self-ascribe and (2) being the agent of your ascription. If we accept that (1) is supported by appeals to our self as the location or metaphysical subject of thinking, and that (1) cannot happen without (2), then insofar as we have reasons—experiential, conceptual, or transcendental—to accept the either the unity or location point, we have reasons to accept the agency point.⁴

Here is another way that theoretical reasons come back into view. Denying that we know ourselves to be the agents of our thinking begins to look like a performative contradiction. We *are* self-conscious, so we *are* self-ascribing, and we could not self-ascribe if we both *were not* and *did not recognize ourselves to be* the agent of thinking. Therefore we are intelligibly the agents of our thinking. To deny this would be to ascribe a thought to yourself of the form 'I am not, or I cannot know that, I am the agent of my thinking' that itself involves intelligibly being the agent of your thinking while simultaneously denying to yourself that you are.

As I read it, this is the point at the heart of a passage Gomes cites from Kant's *Metaphysics Lectures*.⁵

When I say: I think, I act, etc., then either the word I is applied falsely, or I am free. Were I not free, then I could not say: I do it, but rather I would have to say: I feel in me a desire to do, which someone has aroused in me. But when I say: I do it, that means spontaneity in the transcendental sense. But now I am conscious to myself that I can say: I do, therefore I am conscious of no determination in me, and thus I act absolutely freely. (ML1 28:268)

I take Kant to be here saying that self-consciousness is exhibited in certain 'I' thoughts: those in which I ascribe the state to *me*. If I did not have agency—if I was not the determining ground of my

⁴Gomes suggests that we might have these theoretical reasons to accept (1) at 97–98, following arguments like those of Peacocke (2009) and O'Brien (2015). He rejects theoretical reasons for assent in part because he takes Lichtenberg's Challenge to be directed towards deliberative self-consciousness. But if the challenge is not so directed, then it might prompt a reconsideration of the force of these theoretical approaches.

⁵Since this passage comes from lecture notes, and early—pre-Critical—notes at that, there are questions about whether this represents Kant's considered view. These questions are not relevant insofar as we are just concerned with what this passage illustrates, but may come back into view if one were to further develop an account of compelling theoretical reasons for assent to our self-consciousness. See Wuerth (2014) and McLear (2020) for two views that argue for the continuity of these kind of remarks with Kant's mature position in the service of developing such an account.

thought—I would not even be able to frame those thoughts for myself. Since I *can*, and do, frame those thoughts, I must be aware that I am such a determining ground.

Together, these accounts illustrate that taking seriously Lichtenberg's Challenge as a challenge for basic self-consciousness puts pressure on the first condition for practical assent: each promise theoretical reasons for the Agential Claim.

2.2. *Alternative practical options: Lessons from self-consciousness and the moral law*

I turn now to the second angle on this condition. Set aside what I just argued: accept that the Lichtenberg Challenge is directed only towards deliberative self-consciousness, and accept that, for this reason or for others, the standard modes of theoretical justification will not suffice to explain our assent to the claim that we are the agents of our thinking.

Even so, I argue that alternative modes of explanation and justification—and particularly, alternative modes of *practical* justification—are available to us.

In motivating the second condition on practical assent, Gomes appeals to a parallel between the way Kant argues we assent to the claim that God exists, and the way that he (Gomes) argues we assent to the claim that we are the agents of our thinking. Laying out these arguments reveals, I contend, that there is actually a *disanalogy* in their structure. And this disanalogy makes the second argument—Gomes' account of our assent to the Agential Claim—look much closer in structure to the form of justification that Kant takes to give us what he calls *practical cognition*, or *practical knowledge*.

Here is how this goes. Gomes identifies Kant's argument for God's existence as the quintessential example of an appeal to the technical notion of practical assent or faith that Gomes develops and appeals to. The argument begins from the recognition that we are subject to the moral law, and proceeds on this basis.⁶ The moral law demands that we pursue the highest good: i.e., we are required to set the highest good as our end. Since we only pursue ends that we take to be attainable, and since we are required to pursue the highest good, we must take this end to be attainable. The only way we can take this end to be attainable is if we assent to the claim that God exist. Therefore, we must assent to the claim that God exists. This claim is (Kant argues at length) theoretically undecidable. But since, as this argument shows, it is practically required, we must assent to this claim under the mode of *faith*: a particular, *sui generis*, holding-to-be-true.

Gomes takes there to be a parallel argument available for the Agential Claim. As I reconstruct it, this argument begins from the fact that we *are* deliberative self-conscious subjects.⁷ Being a deliberative self-conscious subject, Gomes argues, demands that we settle the question of the propriety of our perspective on the world; we are required to set this settling as our end. Since we can only pursue ends that we take to be attainable, and since we are required to settle the question of the propriety of our perspective, we must take this end to be attainable. The only way we can take this end to be attainable is if we assent to the claim that we are the agents of our thinking. Therefore, we must assent to the claim that we are the agents of our thinking.

This parallel is intended to show that the arguments invoke the same mode of justification: since the Agential Claim is theoretically undecidable but practically required, we must assent to this claim under the mode of *faith*.

But note that these arguments, so reconstructed, are *not* entirely parallel. The key difference between them is that, unlike the argument for God's existence, the argument for the Agential Claim begins from a premise—that we are deliberative self-conscious subjects—that we could not recognize without already (tacitly) being committed to its conclusion.

⁶I follow Gomes in how he spells out this Kantian argument, e.g., at 110 and 114.

⁷The following is a reconstruction of an argument that Gomes presents at, e.g., 125, 129, 131.

Let me spell out this disanalogy. While what it is to be subject to the moral law is, as Gomes nicely illustrates, tightly bound up with an appeal to and assent in God, it does not follow immediately from the recognition of the moral law that we must assent to the claim that God exists. It is instead a result of unpacking the further conditions and inferences that justify the content involved in so recognizing.

Contrast this to the case of deliberative self-consciousness. As Gomes defines it, deliberative self-consciousness *is* the recognition of the subject of your perspective as the possible agent of mental activity. Insofar as we recognize that we are deliberative self-conscious subjects, then, it should follow immediately that we recognize that we *must* be committed to recognizing that we are the agents of our thinking. If the starting point of the argument is the fact that we are deliberative self-conscious subjects, then our assent to its conclusion is integral to get it going in the first place.

The significance of this is that the justificatory structure of the argument for the Agential Claim bears a much closer resemblance to the form of Kant's account of the relationship between the moral law and our recognition of our freedom than it resembles his account of the relationship between the moral law and our faith in God's existence.

Kant claims that the moral law and human freedom stand in a reciprocal relationship, where the freedom is the *ratio essendi* for the moral law (the means by which it can possibly obtain) and the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* for freedom (the means by which we come to be aware of our freedom) (Kant, 1788, 5:5n). And crucially for my argument here, Kant argues that this relationship gives us what he calls *practical cognition*, or *knowledge*, of one's self as free.

He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it and *cognizes* [erkennt] freedom within which, without the moral law, would have remained *unknown* [unbekannt] to him. (Kant, 1788, 5:30, my emphasis)

What is practical cognition? Canonically, Kant distinguishes practical from theoretical cognition by claiming that the former case is one where the act of cognition actualizes its object: that is, when we practically cognize, the existence of the cognized object depends in some way on our representation of it. Now, it is a matter of some controversy and unclarity how exactly we should understand this.⁸ But what is clear is that Kant himself takes it is of a kind distinct from—and perhaps more significant than—the specific and technical mode of assent and epistemic entitlement that “faith” captures.⁹

Making sense of the case above on this line, the recognition of the moral law gives us rational grounds to assent to the claim that we are free, not because of an end that I am required to set, but because it is immediately part of what it is to represent ourselves as governed by the moral law. In so representing, I at least partially actualize this freedom, thereby cognizing it.

Reconstruing the argument from *The Practical Self* in these terms, recognition of the fact that I am a deliberative self-conscious subject gives me rational grounds to assent to the claim that I am the agent of my thinking, not because of an end that I am required to set, but because it is immediately part of what it is to represent myself as a deliberative self-conscious subject. In so representing, I (at least partially) actualize the agential nature of my thinking, thereby cognizing it.

I want to emphasize that I am not arguing for a view that derives the agential features of self-consciousness from the moral law and thereby results in practical knowledge. Instead, I claim that an argument to this conclusion that begins from acknowledging the fact of our deliberative self-consciousness has the same structure of epistemic justification *as* Kant's derivation of freedom. The grounds for justification provided by such an argumentative structure are not theoretical in the standard senses that Gomes canvasses. But nor are they a matter of faith. Instead, it is distinct kind of practical cognition or knowledge.

⁸See Kant (1787), Bx and discussion in Kain (2010), Ameriks (2012), Abaci (2022), and Schafer (2023).

⁹Captured, for instance, by the special status of freedom amongst the postulates of reason (see Kant, 1788, 5:121–132).

Especially as we—as Gomes explicitly does—take Kant and his arguments seriously, this remains an explanatory option, and so remains a threat to the claim that what it is to be a self-conscious subject must be to *have faith* in oneself as the agent of thinking because we lack other routes by which to be entitled to this claim. Further, as I’ve construed the argument about end-setting, this option may be a better candidate to explain the immediacy of our practical commitment to the Agential Claim. Even as I describe this as a threat to the claim about self-consciousness, then, I take this to be friendly to Gomes’ emphasis on the importance of the practical in making sense of self-consciousness. Taking seriously and integrating an analog to Kantian practical cognition means we can be committed to the role of practical reason without giving up a claim about knowledge.

Let me take stock. If Gomes’ argument depends on the Agential Claim satisfying C1, and that satisfaction assumes, as I contend it does, the exhaustivity of the four options I laid out as grounds for our assent, then this argument is under pressure in at least two ways.

If we construe Lichtenberg’s Challenge as a challenge to self-consciousness generally, as I have argued we can, we make available theoretical grounds to support our assent.

If we construe Lichtenberg’s Challenge as a challenge to deliberative self-consciousness, then it makes available a further form of practical epistemic justification, namely, something like practical cognition.

In either case, we can identify alternative grounds for assent to the Agential Claim. Together, these grounds motivate that this claim cannot satisfy C1 with its demanding appeal for theoretical undecidability. Since that is one of two necessary conditions on practical assent understood as faith, the Agential Claim is not apt for this particular kind of assent.

Towards the end of the introduction to *The Practical Self*, Gomes notes suggestively that Kant *should* have taken the account of the thinking self to be a matter of faith. But Kant, very consciously, does *not* extend this treatment to the thinking self, and takes it that it occupies a status that is again consciously and markedly distinct from the status of our faith in God. His reasons for this are, as I hope to have drawn out here, at least conceptually and argumentatively distinct from his appeals to idealism: they have to do with the nature of being conscious of one’s own’s thoughts, including thoughts about the moral law, and what content is imparted in these conscious representations. Making sense of these reasons suggests a view of the self that prioritizes knowledge—either practical or theoretical—over faith as our mode of assent to the agency of our thinking.

3. Can Communal Practices Be Necessary for Self-Consciousness?

That is the force of my Kantian point. Here is the force of Gomes’ Kantian point.

Gomes’s suggestion that Kant should have treated the thinking self as an object of faith is not offered in a vacuum. Kant should have extended this treatment because this faith, Gomes holds, is what introduces our connection to the world. “It is the ways,” he writes “in which our faith in ourselves as thinking agents is sustained by others which shows that self-conscious subjects are related to an objective world. Isolation ends not through God or idealism, but through faith and practice.” (Gomes, 2024, 8).

This takes us to the third sense of practical that I sketched at the outset, and with Gomes’ move back to the world. The idea that our relation to the world is evidenced in our relation to other people and our communal practices is very compelling and explanatorily rich, as is the view that our practices of being deliberative thinkers are intimately bound up with our everyday practices, and especially with our relations to other people. To conclude, then, I turn to consider the strength of the relation between our self-consciousness and our communal practices.

Gomes argues that this relation—between our selves and our communal practices—is *important* but *contingent*. It is not necessary nor required for our assent to the Agential Claim, but it “scaffolds” and “sustains” this assent. He acknowledges that, insofar as this is our connection between the self and the objective world, it might not be as strong as we want. The relation is helpful but not required. And that requirement—a necessary connection between the self and the world—is what we were striving for in taking up the Cartesian and Kantian mantles (Gomes, 2024, 161–2).

Gomes ends, though, with a brief but enticing remark about the role of inter-subjectivity in post-Kantian projects, sounding the call to “someone inclined to these post-Kantian speculations to take this as the first step in an argument for the stronger conclusion.” (Gomes, 2024, 163).

A thesis that exemplifies these post-Kantian speculations about community and inter-subjectivity is Fichte’s doctrine of the “summons,” in which he argues, in a sentence, that a condition on self-consciousness (on my awareness of my self as an individual) is a summons: a demand from a rational being distinct from myself. My self-consciousness, then, necessarily depends on the existence of another: there is a necessary connection between the self and the world of other people. So glossed this suggests the stronger conclusion that Gomes invites. But this Fichtean doctrine is fraught: there is difficulty in acceding to the claim that an individual *is not self-consciousness* absent a relation to another.¹⁰

I contend that Gomes’ arguments offer material with which to sketch a more plausible version of this doctrine while retaining its central idea. Such a sketch must here be brief. I present it to, first, just suggest a way that Gomes’ argument could be developed. But second, to make available an option (or the beginning of an option) that preserves the importance and relevance of our practices of holding each other accountable in thinking about the nature of self and self-referring thoughts, even if that importance is not located in their acting as scaffolding for this faith.

The argument I have in mind returns to the distinction between basic self-consciousness and deliberative self-consciousness. Deliberative self-consciousness is the recognition of your perspective and the thinking of the subject of that perspective as the possible agent of mental activity: in essence, the evaluation of your perspective. This is a higher-order self-consciousness—above and beyond self-ascription—but it is the thing that is of central value to being the kind of human agents that we are. Add, here, a suitably modified version of a summons. *Deliberative* self-consciousness is made possible by the *practices of holding each other accountable*. We come to have this capacity for self-evaluation (so this argument goes) by virtue of recognizing these practices. Our holding and being held accountable is what first takes us from mere self-ascription to full-blown evaluation. This relation to other people, in that sense, resembles the Fichtean summons specifically for deliberative self-consciousness. Following Fichte, our relation to other people—the way they hold us accountable—is a condition *on* this state, not just *on* our assent to the state.

There is clearly a great deal more that would need to be said if we were to take seriously this alternative argument for the role of community in self-consciousness. Absent this detail we should hold, with Gomes, that this role is not necessary. Even so, we can offer some strengthening of the relation. For instance, an even further weakened ‘summons-inspired view’ could allow that practices of accountability will be a condition on deliberative self-consciousness for *most* people, but not all—some people come to recognize the need for evaluation simply by pushing on the world and having it push back on them. To that extent, the relation is not strictly universal (and so not necessary). But in holding that this is the way in for some, if not most, people, we still get a tight and quasi-generative connection between self and practice.

On this Fichtean-inspired view, we could get this practical commitment—the commitment to our connection to other people and their practices of holding accountable—without the commitment to *faith* that needs scaffolding. In that case, even absent the satisfaction of C1 and so absent the practical assent and faith it engenders, we can arrive at the valuable conclusion that Gomes leads us to in *The Practical Self*, of the importance of community and particularly of a community that challenges and questions each other.¹¹

¹⁰The thesis is stated in both Fichte’s *Foundations of Natural Right* (1796, III: 30–40) and the *System of Ethics* (1798, IV: 218–29). See Kosch, 2020 for discussion.

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