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Relations of the Self

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AUTOCRACY.
THE PSYCHO-POLITICS OF SELF-RULE IN PLATO AND KANT¹

"Now the phrase "master of himself" is an absurdity, is it not?
For he who is master of himself would also be subject to himself, and he who is subject to himself would be master."²

"He was accustomed to calling his upper and lower faculties of the soul the Upper House and Lower House, and very often the former passed a bill that the latter rejected."³

The paper contrasts and compares the theory of the self in Plato and Kant by examining the systematic use of political conceptuality for the structuring of ethical discourse in the works of both philosophers. The focus is on the complex set-up of the practical self as the arena for competing orientations and claims. The first half of the paper explores Plato’s reliance on the constitution of the ideal city state for the analogous composition of the soul in the Republic. Special attention is devoted to the relational structure of the soul and the linkage function of "high-spiritedness" (θυμός) in the threefold arrangement of the soul’s basic functions. The second half of the paper presents the basic outline of Kant’s mature theory of practical subjectivity, chiefly contained in the extensive three sets of introductions of his late main work in practical philosophy, The Metaphysics of Morals.⁴ The analyses focus

¹ A German version of this paper has appeared under the title "Autokratie. Die Psycho-Politik der Selbstherrschaft bei Platon und Kant" in: Kant als Bezügspunkt philosophischen Denkens, ed. Hubertus Busche and Anton Schmitt, Würzburg 2010, pp. 351-377.
⁴ Kant’s gesammelte Schriften, edited by the Prussian Academy of Sciences (vol. 1-22), the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin (vol. 23) and German Academy of Sciences in Göttingen (from vol. 24), Berlin, later Berlin,
on the key concepts drawn from modern political philosophy that inform Kant’s understanding and presentation of the relational structure of the practical self, with special attention devoted to the originally political concepts of autonomy and autocracy. The point of pairing Plato and Kant in an account of the practical self-relation is not a substantial comparison of particular political and ethical doctrines but a functional comparison of the formative role of political thought for the conception of selfhood in both philosophers. Plato and Kant emerge, each in his own way, as proponents of a comprehensive practical philosophy that does not sever the theory and practice of ethics from that of law and politics.

1. The Soul and the City

Philosophical discussions of the structure and status of selfhood often focus on the cognitive self and center on the form and function of theoretical self-consciousness. This also holds for much of historically-informed and -inflected work on the self in Kant and his idealist successors, especially Fichte and Hegel. In particular, work on Kant’s theory of subjectivity typically has focused on the nature of non-empirical, ”pure” self-consciousness or transcendental apperception, on the distinction between self-consciousness (Selbstbewußtsein) and self-knowledge (Selbsterkenntnis), and on the difference between the noumenal and the phenomenal self. By contrast, comparatively little attention has been paid to the constitution of practical subjectivity in Kant. Yet much of the terminology and conceptuality that serves to demarcate and designate issues of selfhood in philosophy, including those concerning the theoretical self, originate in the sphere of human practical relations and their treatment in practical philosophy. The very language of ”activity” (Tätigkeit), ”action” (Handlung), ”act” (actus), drawn on by Kant and his successors to identify and characterize the nature of the self in general and that of the theoretical or cognitive self in particular, stems from the sphere of human practical relations. In Fichte the previously somewhat clandestine presence of specifically practical features in the generic constitution of subjectivity even turns into an outright primacy of the practical.5

But the use of practical references in the Kantian and post-Kantian discourse on the self is not limited to matters of language and terminology. Rather it informs and structures the very development of modern theories of selfhood. To be sure, the central concern of much of modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant and after with epistemological issues concerning certainty and objectivity has lead to a predominant focus on the self as the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge claims. But the self also figures prominently in modern legal, political and ethical thought on the status of the individual and its relation to civil society and the state. Accordingly, comprehensive accounts of selfhood in the modern


5 On the Kantian antecedents of Fichte’s doctrine of the primacy of the practical, see Günter Zöller, ”Am Anfang war... die Tat. Der Primat des Praktischen und das Faktum der reinen Vernunft in der Philosophie Kants,” in: Am Anfang war..., Ursprungfiguren und Anfangskonstruktionen der Moderne, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach and Eckhard Schumacher, Munich 2008, pp. 91-105.