

THE EMPIRICAL SELF
A REPLY TO MR. ROHATYN*

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I am grateful to Mr. Rohatyn for pointing out some inadequacies in my paper on the self. I am still working on these problems, but this Reply is not a statement of my present views.

Mr. Rohatyn objects to my saying "It is a necessary truth that there can be no a priori concepts of empirical entities". But his objections seem to be based on misunderstanding. First, he gives imaginary and fictional entities as counter-examples. Certainly unicorns and fictional characters count as empirical entities. But the concept of a unicorn is no more a priori than the concept of a horse; nor is the concept of a citizen of Erewhon, but not the concept of a citizen of France, a priori. Concepts of such entities are built up at least partly from experience just like concepts of actual entities.

Next, Mr. Rohatyn says that the concept 'empirical entity' is itself non-empirical. I agree, for I agree also with his later generalisation that no concept is itself an empirical entity. However the former point is quite irrelevant to what I was arguing. In talking about the logical status of concepts of empirical entities, I was saying absolutely nothing about the logical status of concepts of concepts. And the latter generalisation is also quite irrelevant to my point, since even if concepts (like numbers) are not empirical entities, it does not in the least follow that all concepts are a priori concepts. The distinctions empirical/non-empirical and a posteriori/a priori have nothing to do with one another. Mr. Rohatyn's

* Mr. Dennis Rohatyn's article, "Mr. Walker on the Self", appeared in *Critica*, Volume VI, N° 16-17, January-May, 1972.

argument does expose the possibility that, since concepts are not themselves empirical entities, they may be a priori concepts of some concepts. But this, too, has absolutely nothing to do with what I was saying.

He says also that if my assertion is a necessary truth, then it is not an empirical truth. That is so. I do not believe that any propositions about concepts (or numbers) are empirical truths. But it does not follow that concepts have to be a priori entities themselves. There can be non-empirical (analytic) truths even about a posteriori concepts. My paper is meant to be full of such analytic truths about the a posteriori concept of the empirical self. I do not see the relevance of this point as an objection to anything I was saying.

Mr. Rohatyn seems to have confused 'a priori' with 'non-empirical'. As I used these terms in my paper, 'empirical' and 'non-empirical' refer to the logical status of entities (in respect of our ways of identifying them, and therefore of their identity-criteria). 'A priori' and 'a posteriori', however, refer only to the logical relation between the content of a concept (or proposition) and experience. It makes no sense to call entities 'a priori' or 'a posteriori'.

In the bulk of his discussion, Mr. Rohatyn takes aim at various statements I make about the four alleged criteria for self-hood. His opening remark that the first three criteria do not suffice to distinguish selves from plants or natural objects is perfectly correct but irrelevant. Obviously those three criteria, taken by themselves, are at most necessary conditions for self-hood, and in no way sufficient and distinguishing conditions. However, if selves are empirical entities it may still be worth pointing out that it is plausible to suppose they will share some defining features with other kinds of empirical entities. They will share some general criteria of identity. But Mr. Rohatyn is just wrong to say that I implied that plants could have (or be) selves.

He says, quite rightly, that I do not give plain convincing answers to two crucial questions: What is consciousness? and what is it to possess consciousness? I am not unaware of this,

just as I am aware that no philosopher dead or living has yet given answers both plain and convincing. My paper is an attempt, crude and confused as it is, to point the way towards a new kind of answer. Very roughly, the answer runs as follows. We ascribe selves, self-hood, to persons: it is persons that possess selves. That is, in searching for principles to identify persons as the postulated sources of observable patterns of behaviour, and at the same time to explain such observed behaviour as flowing from a unique source, we are searching for principles for identifying conscious (and normally self-conscious) beings and at the same time for explaining their observed behaviour in relation to this consciousness (and self-consciousness). The proposition that persons act and possess consciousness (and normally self-consciousness) are axioms, since they are taken as a priori conceptual truths. That means, as Moore might have said, we are entitled to be certain of them even without being able to give a plain convincing analysis of their sense. The concept of the self is just the concept of a person's identity, so far as the latter concept is required as a postulate in the collocation and explanation of observed behaviour. (Hegel, not as Mr. Rohatyn suggests Kant, is the ancestor of this way of posing the philosophical problem of self-hood).

Mr. Rohatyn notices that I distinguish 'the substantial principle', viz. the postulated self, and the 'phenomena', viz. the observed behaviour. He appears wrongly to think I make this distinction universally, whereas I say explicitly it can be made only for conscious beings; for non-conscious organic entities (and inorganic entities) phenomenalism in this area may well hold up. I make this distinction because in daily life we make easily a crude version of the same distinction, and in my paper I named some of these ordinary occasions —hypocritical, self-deceitful, lying, and weakwilled behaviour or speech, for example. I might have added that such a distinction underlies psychoanalytical theory. It is clear that in such cases we ordinarily and easily assume some distinction, or gap, between a person's behaviour and his consciousness; and

often a gap between his consciousness and his self-consciousness.

I claimed in my paper that consciousness and self-consciousness are necessary conditions for ascribing self-hood. Ascribing self-hood to an entity is a particular way of assigning to that entity a principle (criterion) of identity which can function as collocatory and explanatory of that entity's 'phenomenal' activity. Nothing, obviously, prevents us assigning selves to stones, plants, or dogs; but nothing demands this, whereas the phenomena of human activity, the behaviour of persons, do demand just this. Sometimes such assignation fails, e.g. with schizophrenics, or is doubtful, e.g. with neonates. But we can speak of doubtful or unsuccessful assignation only against a background of ordinarily successful assignation. In daily life we normally assume that persons are conscious and self-conscious, and normally understand their activities and patterns of activity: and warrantably so. Mr. Rohatyn says that my claim that self-consciousness is normally accompanied by self-hood is either unproven or tautologous. I intend it as tautologous. But it is not a mere verbal tautology. Where we find self-consciousness, there we find phenomena of behaviour which require, for their collocation and explanation, an identity-principle that cannot be given in the phenomena. Therefore we require postulation of some non-phenomenal identity principle for such entities; and it is just this role that the concept of the self occupies.

Mr. Rohatyn notices that I speak of the self's 'extension in time', though kindly remaining silent about my difficulties here. But he complains that I say nothing about its extension in space. According to my explanations, this notion is senseless; even if it makes some sense to speak of an identity-principle as 'extended in time', it makes no sense at all to speak of such an entity as extended in space. What is extended in space is that entity to which self-hood is ascribed, viz. the person. I said nothing about this point because I judged it to be sufficiently clear that the entities about

whose identity-principles I was talking were extended in space.

In conclusion, I am surprised to find Mr. Rohatyn calling me an empiricist. I think my own views are far closer to Kant's or Hegel's than to say Hume's. But it is not to the Transcendental Deduction that I should compare them; it is rather to the Paralogisms of Pure Reason. The concept of the empirical self, although not an a priori concept, is (as I suggested earlier) a theoretical concept, or construct.