

# Inquiry

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/sinq20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/sinq20)

## Agency and theoretical reason in *The Practical Self*

Manish Oza

To cite this article: Manish Oza (07 Dec 2024): Agency and theoretical reason in *The Practical Self*, Inquiry, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2024.2438243](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2438243)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2438243>



Published online: 07 Dec 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Agency and theoretical reason in *The Practical Self*

Manish Oza

Faculty of Law, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

### ABSTRACT

My comments focus on the relation between theoretical reason and agency in Gomes' account. I argue that, while Gomes is right that agency plays a role in relating us to an objective world, accounting for it does not require us to exclude theoretical reason in advance by requiring that the propositions to which we practically assent be theoretically undecidable. There are both theoretical and practical grounds for taking ourselves to have agency in thinking, and we should prefer an account of reason which allows both kinds of grounds to play a role in rationalizing our commitments. Gomes should, therefore, weaken the dualism of theoretical and practical reason which he takes over from Kant. This dualism is in any event hard to sustain outside the context of transcendental idealism; weakening it allows for what I suggest is a better account of the interaction between theoretical and practical reason.



**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 4 November 2024; Accepted 2 December 2024

**KEYWORDS** Agency; rationality; theoretical reason; practical reason; belief

The project of *The Practical Self* is to figure out what kind of relation to an objective world is required or supported by our consciousness of ourselves.<sup>1</sup> One central idea in the book is that, if we are to move from self-consciousness to objectivity, it will not be in exactly the way that previous philosophers have wanted to make this move – namely, by showing that self-consciousness gives us epistemic access to some content from which we can infer that we are related to an objective world – but rather by way of a different feature of self-consciousness, the agency we take ourselves to exercise in thinking.

The apparent fact that we make up our minds and are responsible for what we believe is crucial for Gomes. He argues for a deep connection between agency in thinking and relation to an objective world. The formal structure of the argument can be set out as follows:

---

**CONTACT** Manish Oza  moza@uwo.ca  Faculty of Law, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Catherine Rioux and Zain Raza for their comments on this article.

© 2024 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

1. There are no theoretical grounds for or against believing that we have agency in thinking.
2. There are practical grounds for accepting as true that we have agency in thinking.
3. If there are no theoretical grounds for or against believing  $p$ , but there are practical grounds for accepting  $p$  as true, we should practically assent to  $p$ .<sup>2</sup>
4. We should practically assent that we have agency in thinking.
5. Our practice of intellectual interaction with other thinkers presupposes that we have agency in thinking.
6. Practical assent to a proposition  $p$  is sustained by practices which presuppose  $p$ .
7. Practical assent that we have agency in thinking is sustained by our practice of intellectual interaction with other thinkers.
8. Intellectual interaction with other thinkers relates us to an objective world.
9. Practical assent that we have agency in thinking relates us to an objective world.

The argument from 1–4 establishes a claim about our basis for taking ourselves to have agency in thinking, while the argument from 5–9 shows that this basis relates us to an objective world.

Let me elaborate on the argument from 1–4 in a more intuitive way. Gomes argues that, while we lack theoretical (epistemic) reasons for or against believing that we have agency in thinking, we have a different kind of reason for accepting this as true. For Gomes, when a proposition is left open theoretically, we can be justified in assenting to it for the right kind of practical reasons. In this case, the practical reason is that we have an obligation to make up our minds on what to believe, to settle the propriety of our beliefs about the world. We ought to pursue this end, but we can do this only if we take ourselves to have agency in thinking. As a result, we are entitled to take ourselves to have agency in thinking. The self which grounds our relation to an objective world is, thus, practical in two senses: because it is essentially an agent, and because our grounds for accepting its existence are practical rather than theoretical (2024, 132).

---

<sup>2</sup>Gomes leaves open whether practical assent is a form of belief (2024, 128). The crucial points for him are that it is a form of holding a proposition true, and that it is not based on theoretical (i.e. epistemic) considerations. I will use “belief” for holding a proposition true on theoretical grounds, “practical assent” for holding a proposition true on practical grounds, and “commitment” as a generic term for both.

My comments will focus on the relation between theoretical reason and agency in Gomes' account. In particular, I'll argue that, while Gomes is right that agency plays a role in relating us to an objective world, accounting for this role does not require us to exclude theoretical reason in the way he suggests. Given this focus, my comments will address the set-up of Gomes' inquiry and steps 1–4 of his argument, largely bypassing his account of how practical assent is sustained and his claim that our intersubjective relation to other thinkers is a relation to an objective world.

The comments will go as follows. In the first section, I'll discuss the historical and dialectical context in which one might want to move from self-consciousness to objectivity. I'll argue that further reflection on Gomes' motivation for this move might support a different approach to the inquiry than that of his predecessors. In the second section, I turn to the first step of Gomes' argument, which aims to establish that our acceptance that we are agents of our thinking is grounded not in theoretical reason but in practical reason. I will argue that while Gomes does show that practical reason can ground our commitment to this proposition, his substantive objections to grounding it in theoretical reason (directed at an argument from Tyler Burge (1998)) fail. Moreover, the dialectical difficulties faced by Burge's argument also apply to Gomes' own. In the third section, I take a brief detour to point out an alternative route from a 'practical self' to the world, arguing that it has some advantages over Gomes' own route. In the fourth section, I argue that Gomes should weaken the dualism of theoretical and practical reason which he takes over from Kant. This would allow for a better account of conflicts between theoretically and practically grounded commitments.

## 1. The point of the project

'What connection, if any, is there between being self-conscious and being related to an objective world?' (2024, 9) This is the question that Gomes aims to answer. He clarifies it in two important ways. First, while the idea that there is a connection between being self-conscious and being related to an objective world does not yet imply that one is prior to the other, self-consciousness is prior to the objective world in Gomes' inquiry. Gomes is interested in the prospects for a move 'from self-consciousness to objectivity, from isolation to the world' (2024, 16), not in the reverse direction. Second, not just any connection will do. Gomes is concerned to find a connection that is, or can be made, manifest to us.

A satisfactory answer ‘must show not only that self-consciousness requires being related to an objective world, but that the relation between self-consciousness and objectivity can be made intelligible to the self-conscious subject’ (2024, 19). In sum, then, we want to know what kind of relation to an objective world is required or supported by self-consciousness in a way that can be made intelligible to the self-conscious subject. Before discussing how Gomes pursues it, I want to discuss the context in which such a project would make sense.

One context in which a project like this would make sense is if we had some kind of positive cognitive relation to ourselves which we didn’t at the outset have to the world: for short, an *initial asymmetry* between our relation to ourselves and our relation to the world. For example, we might have certainty in self-consciousness which we don’t have in the world, or we might know the contents of our minds but not know that we are related to an objective world. In such a context, we might want to show that the positive cognitive relation we have to ourselves can be extended out to the world: for example, that, granting that we have certainty in self-consciousness, we can reason our way to a similar certainty in the world.

This asymmetrical starting-point, and the skepticism it engenders about the external world, motivated the historical philosophers whose arguments Gomes presents as antecedents of his own. Descartes’ reasoning in the *Meditations* (1641/1996) has this form: I know that I am thinking (and thus that I exist), but I can doubt that the world exists, so I’ll move from knowledge of my own thinking and existence to knowledge that the world exists. Kant is also concerned with external world skepticism (though it is less central for him than for Descartes). He calls it a ‘scandal to philosophy’ that ‘the existence of things outside us ... should have to be assumed merely *on faith*, and that if it occurs to anyone to doubt it, we should be unable to answer him with a satisfactory proof’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787/1998, Bxxxix note). One advantage of Kant’s transcendental idealism is that it permits an answer to the skeptic.

In this light, you might take Gomes’ project to be a response to external world skepticism, driven by the initial asymmetry. This would explain why he is interested in moving from self to world, not the other way, and why the connection has to be intelligible to the self-conscious subject: a connection that is not intelligible to the subject cannot provide the subject with a response to skeptical doubt. But Gomes disclaims this motivation. He writes:

It is common to present Descartes' motivation in starting with self-consciousness as resting on an illegitimate demand for certainty. This can seem quaint in its requirement that stability be achieved only through building on firm foundations and mistaken in assuming that the meditator's knowledge of his self-conscious life is somehow more secure than his knowledge of the world. (2024, 2)

While Gomes doesn't quite endorse these critiques of Descartes, he suggests that the project of moving from self to world can be motivated independently of the initial asymmetry:

Descartes's isolationist starting point need not be motivated by the thought that our self-conscious capacities are especially secure in delivering knowledge about our own minds. It can start instead from a more flat-footed recognition that these capacities are central to our human lives, both intellectual and practical. Understanding the nature of those capacities is thus a central part of understanding what it is to be human ... Descartes's isolationist starting point can be seen as a way of making vivid an inquiry which turns self-conscious capacities on themselves as a way to examine how much is built into the fact that we are creatures with such capacities. (2024, 2–3)

Even if our knowledge of the world is already secure, the fact (if it turns out that way) that some such knowledge is built in to our self-consciousness tells us something significant about ourselves. On this 'more flat-footed' way of construing the project, there is less urgency in finding a route from self to world. It's not as if, without such a route, we are stuck in isolation. But it is still worthwhile to see if such a route exists.

This is a fine reason to carry out an investigation, but if the aim is simply to learn something about ourselves, we might doubt whether Descartes' starting point is the right one. This comes out in Gomes' discussion of '[t]he twentieth-century retreat' (2024, 37), a retreat from the bigger ambition of getting all the way out to the world to the narrower goal of establishing intentional directedness *towards* a world. Gomes presents this as a broad characterization of twentieth-century philosophers' responses to the Cartesian and Kantian projects, both in the analytical and phenomenological traditions. Now (even granting that any broad characterization will have exceptions) I am not sure that this is right. I want to suggest that many twentieth-century philosophers were pursuing a different project than the Cartesian and Kantian one, not a less ambitious version of it.

To take one tradition important to Gomes, the PF Strawson of *Individuals* seems less interested in how much objectivity is contained in self-consciousness than in how various parts of our basic conceptual scheme are interconnected (1959, 10). It's true (Strawson might say) that my basic conception of myself leads out to a basic conception of

an objective world, but this observation is very closely related to another one, that my basic conception of an objective world leads back to a basic conception of myself. The latter observation is the one Gareth Evans takes up in showing that '[t]he very idea of a perceivable, objective, spatial world brings with it the idea of the subject as being *in* the world' (1982, 222; cf 1980), in other words that relation to an objective world requires a conception of my own receptivity to that world.

The early Heidegger also develops an account of a basic conceptual scheme, 'being-in-the-world', where the subject and the world are part of a '*unitary phenomenon*' (1927/1962, 53/78) that is constitutively prior to its elements. This is the same Heidegger who, in response to Kant, said that the real scandal 'is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*' (1927/1962, 204/249). The demand for a proof, he suggests, is the result of an inadequate starting-point. Even the idea that the world cannot be proven but should be taken on faith reflects the residual pull of an illegitimate demand:

To *have faith* in the Reality of the 'external world', whether rightly or wrongly; to '*prove*' this Reality for it, whether adequately or inadequately; to *presuppose* it, whether explicitly or not — attempts such as these which have not mastered their own basis with full transparency, presuppose a subject which is proximally *worldless* or unsure of its world, and which must, at bottom, first assure itself of a world. (1927/1962, 206/250)

To 'retreat' from a more ambitious project, Heidegger might say, still presupposes that that project made sense in the first place.

Gomes disclaims Descartes' motivation, but retains his direction of inquiry on the basis that '[self-conscious] capacities are central to our human lives' (2024, 2). These twentieth-century examples suggest that once we reject the motivation, the direction of our inquiry should also change. Instead of getting us *from* the self *to* the world, Gomes' argument might be seen, alongside those of philosophers like Evans and Heidegger, as part of a unified inquiry into self and world. On such an approach, neither self nor world would be taken as prior. I'll return at the end to what this might look like.

## 2. The first step: agency in thinking

If we are going to go from self-consciousness to objectivity, how do we do it? The first step of Gomes' argument aims to show that we must practically assent that we have agency in thinking.

The idea of being agents of our own thinking comes from Georg Lichtenberg's objection to Descartes' *cogito*. In Gomes' interpretation, Lichtenberg objects not to the claim that I exist, but to the claim that I am doing the thinking. How do I know my thoughts don't just strike me like lightning, so that they're in me, but not *by me*? Gomes argues that we lack theoretical grounds for taking ourselves to be agents of our thinking, but that we do have practical grounds for it. I'm going to discuss both Gomes' criticisms of theoretical grounds for taking ourselves to be agents in thinking and his proposed practical grounds. I'll suggest that the theoretical grounds are more viable than Gomes suggests, and that in the end the theoretical and practical grounds occupy similar dialectical positions.

### 2.1. Theoretical grounds for agency

In arguing that we lack theoretical grounds for taking ourselves to be agents of our thinking, Gomes rejects an argument from Burge which aims to show that we do. Burge (1998) describes an activity of 'critical reasoning', where we deliberately settle questions on what to believe by considering what the reasons are that bear on them.<sup>3</sup> Burge accepts that one might engage in reasoning without fully understanding it; he argues only that if one is to understand reasoning, one must regard oneself as an agent in thinking.

The idea is that, in reasoning, if I weigh up the reasons bearing on  $p$ , concluding that  $p$  is supported by the evidence, I am (in normal cases) immediately moved to believe  $p$ ; by contrast, my conclusion has no immediate effect on whether you believe  $p$ . Understanding critical reasoning requires that I have a way of distinguishing these cases, and (Burge suggests) only the I-concept can do this: 'third-person attributions do not mark the immediate rational relevance of rational evaluation to implementation of the evaluation' (1998, 250). It is only if the attitude towards  $p$  is my own that my conclusion that the evidence supports  $p$  provides immediate motivation for maintaining the attitude. Moreover, '[i]f one conceptualizes this fully, one recognizes oneself as an agent' (1998, 251).

As presented by Gomes, Burge's argument goes as follows:

1. Understanding reasoning requires marking the difference between cases in which our evaluation of reasons bearing on a propositional

---

<sup>3</sup>For ease of expression, I will just say "reasoning".



attitude immediately motivates changing the attitude and cases in which it does not.

2. Marking this difference requires using the first person concept (in a particular way).
3. Using the first person concept (in this way) involves thinking of oneself as an agent in one's thinking.
4. Thus, understanding reasoning involves thinking of oneself as an agent in one's thinking.

Gomes objects to the second and third premises, but I am not sure that either objection lands.

In response to the second premise, Gomes argues that I might think of someone else in such a way that an evaluation of the reasons bearing on a proposition immediately motivates modification of that person's propositional attitudes. (For example, if I'm a teacher, if I think the balance of reasons supports  $p$ , I might thereby be motivated to get my students to believe  $p$ .) Thus, the class of cases in which evaluation of reasons immediately motivates changing an attitude need not coincide with the use of the first person concept.

Burge might push back here. His suggestion is not only that reasoning involves immediate motivation, but that it involves 'immediate implementation' of the evaluation of the attitude (1998, 252, emphasis omitted). In other words, if I consider the balance of reasons and determine that it favours  $p$ , I'm not only motivated to believe  $p$ : other things being equal, I just do believe  $p$ . Unfortunately for teachers, this is only possible in relation to my own attitudes. As Burge puts it, 'When the subject of the evaluated attitude is not understood to be oneself, one can propose to affect the attitude in accordance with the evaluation only non-immediately, by some means'. So if the distinction is between immediate implementation and implementation 'by some means', it does have to be drawn by a first person concept.

In response to the third premise, Gomes considers whether I might use a first person concept to mark the relevant distinction while leaving open whether I am an agent. Before considering Gomes' way of pulling apart these two concepts, let me rehearse some reasons to doubt that this is possible. Let us imagine a case in which I do need a first person concept to mark the relevant distinction, but am not an agent. Suppose that I am moved by my evaluation of reasons, but in a mechanical way – as I am affected by the force of gravity. It is still true that when I weigh up the reasons bearing on  $p$ , I am immediately caused to modify

my beliefs accordingly, while my weighing-up has no such immediate impact on your beliefs. In order to understand this phenomenon, I might need a first person concept, but it would not be an agential one. If this phenomenon counts as reasoning, then it is possible to understand reasoning with a non-agential first person concept.

I want to suggest that in such a case, I am not engaged in reasoning. The case is similar to one described by Akeel Bilgrami (1998): Oblomov, the wholly passive subject.<sup>4</sup> When Oblomov ‘thinks’, this is not something he does; rather, he is ‘assailed’ by thoughts. In other words, Oblomov is subjectively aware of thoughts, but experiences them as simply happening to him rather than as being under his rational control. In some cases, Oblomov may undergo a series of thoughts which stand in rational relations: for example, he is assailed by the thought  $p$ , and then by *if  $p$ , then  $q$* , and finally by  $q$ . But he does not experience the first two thoughts as providing a reason for him to have the third. Now, let us suppose, further, that Oblomov has a tendency to be moved by reasons, in the sense that when he believes  $p$  and *if  $p$ , then  $q$* , he tends to believe  $q$ . It still seems that something is missing such that he is not reasoning.

There are different ways of saying what is missing in Oblomov’s case. We could say that his sequence of mental events lacks the ‘first-personal necessity’ (Rödl 2018, 91ff.) of reasoning. While the first two thoughts necessitate the third, there is nothing first-personal about this: Oblomov does not experience the first two thoughts as necessitating *him* to judge the third. Similarly, Christine Korsgaard (2009, 69) writes that when you draw an inference,

it’s an act of self-determination, in the sense that the activity of your own mind is part of what produces the belief in you. Suppose you believe two premises, and a certain conclusion follows. You won’t automatically believe that conclusion, because you might not notice the connection between them. But if you do notice the connection, and put the premises together in the way suggested by the connection, then you do something: you draw the conclusion. In drawing the conclusion—or, as we say, in making up your mind, in constituting your mind—you determine yourself to believe it.

By contrast, Oblomov is not making up his mind when the conclusion ‘assails’ him. A final characterization of what is missing here comes from Richard Moran (2001, ch. 2), who emphasizes that our attitude towards our beliefs is normally not spectatorial, but deliberative: the job is not

---

<sup>4</sup>Bilgrami’s Oblomov is inspired by the main character from Ivan Goncharov’s 1859 novel *Oblomov*. For further discussion, see Rattan (2002, 149). This paragraph and the next are taken with revisions from Chapter 2 of my dissertation, *Logical Form and the Limits of Thought* (University of Toronto, 2020).

to find out what we already believe, but to decide what to believe. Oblomov could, at best, relate to his mental processes in a spectatorial way – as revealing to him what he already believes – but not as a process of deciding what to believe.

Along these lines, Gomes notes that Burge would reject the non-agential first person on the basis that understanding reasoning requires thinking of myself as ‘a locus of power and responsibility, a subject with the capacity to shape my attitudes in response to my evaluation of them’ (2024, 109). Gomes grants this much, but, proposing an analogy with the civil service, maintains that this is not yet agency:

[The civil service] cleanly distinguishes those who exercise power and responsibility from those who actually do the work. ... It is possible to exercise power and responsibility over actions, as my head of section did, without being the person undertaking those actions. And it is possible to be the locus of power and responsibility ... without being the thing exercising that power. Burge’s first-person concept marks the place where things happen. This is not yet an agent. (2024, 109)

We should go slowly here. I think Gomes is right that being the locus of power and responsibility in relation to some set of actions is not, across the board, the same as being the agent of those actions. In an organization, the one who issues the orders and takes responsibility for the consequences need not be the one carrying out the work. The question is whether these two roles can come apart in the case of thinking.

I suggested above that reasoning involves not only being moved by reasons but making up your mind. Can I use a first person concept to mark my power to determine what I believe, but leave open whether I am the agent who implements the change? For example, can I maintain that I am the one who evaluated the reasons bearing on  $p$  and concluded that they favour believing in  $p$ , but leave open whether the result – my believing in  $p$  – was done by me, or simply happened in me? I’m not sure. In the civil service, the head of section might order that some report be written, and might be responsible for its contents, while the report is actually written by a subordinate. The difficulty is to make sense of the distinction between issuing the order and carrying it out in the case of thinking. In normal cases, once I have determined that I ought to believe  $p$ , I simply do believe  $p$ . Identifying which proposition is at issue –  $p$  – and which attitude my reasons require me to take to it – believing – is all I need to do to believe  $p$ . And anything less than identifying the relevant proposition and attitude would fail to fully specify my exercise of power and

responsibility. So there is no room for a (normal) case in which the order is issued but not carried out.

Aside from his substantive objections, Gomes does raise an additional concern about Burge's argument: that it may not have dialectical force in the context of Lichtenberg's challenge. In a setting in which it is in question whether I am entitled to think of myself as an agent in thinking, it is also in question whether I am entitled to take myself to be a reasoner. This is fair, but given how close we have come to the territory of Gomes' own argument, we may wonder whether a similar objection might be raised there: namely that in a setting in which it is in question whether I am entitled to think of myself as an agent in thinking, it is also in question whether I am entitled to take myself to have the end of settling the propriety of my perspective on the world. I will elaborate on this objection in the next section, after setting out Gomes' argument in more detail.

## 2.2. Practical grounds for agency

Gomes argues, drawing on an idea from Kant, that we have practical grounds for accepting that we are agents in our thinking. Kant's idea is that there are some propositions such that we could not have theoretical grounds for or against them: propositions which are 'withdrawn from any possible insight of speculative reason' (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788/1996, 5:120), or as Gomes puts it, theoretically undecidable. Suppose that  $p$  is theoretically undecidable; despite this, we might still have practical grounds for accepting or rejecting  $p$ . In particular, we might have an obligation to do some action, where doing that action is possible only if we accept  $p$ . In such a context, we have practical grounds for accepting  $p$ . Assenting to a proposition on (the right kind of) practical grounds is what Kant called faith (*Glaube*).

Kant's own version of this structure involves the moral law, which imposes on us a duty to pursue the highest good. We can pursue the highest good only if we take its instantiation to be possible, and (given Kant's account of the highest good) it is possible only if, among other things, God exists. Thus, while it is theoretically undecidable whether God exists, we have practical grounds to assent to this proposition. We are entitled to accept this because we have to: 'now there enters *the right of reason's need*' (Kant, *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?*, 1786/1996, 8:137).

Gomes uses the same structure, but the end we have to pursue, in his version, is not a moral one. Rather, each of us is obliged 'to settle the

propriety of their perspective on the world' (2024, 125), to bring their propositional attitudes in line with their evaluation of the reasons bearing on them. Gomes observes that something like this end is fundamental to the Cartesian project, and that it also has connections to Kant's idea of thinking for oneself. (I think he could say something even more general. Settling the propriety of my perspective is fundamental to *any* project of intellectual reform. It is equally essential to, for example, an anti-foundationalist project along the lines of Neurath's Boat, where I don't start from a secure core and work outwards, but rather revise my beliefs as a going concern.) Now, I can pursue this end only if I accept that it is attainable – in other words, that I will make up my mind on the basis of reasons. And this, in turn, requires that I take it to be the case that I will make up my mind – in other words, that I am the agent of my thinking. Supposing that it is theoretically undecidable whether I am such an agent, it follows that I am entitled to accept that I am on practical grounds.

I find the argument compelling, but I wonder whether it has any dialectical advantage over Burge's argument. Gomes' starting point, that I have to settle the propriety of my perspective, seems very close to the conclusion, that I am an agent in my thinking. As a result, it's not clear the former has much leverage to get us to assent to the latter. Earlier, we noted that if it is in question whether I am an agent in thinking, it is also in question whether I am a reasoner. Here, we can add that it is just as much in question whether I am obliged to settle the propriety of my perspective on the world.

In response, Gomes might lean more heavily on the distinction between theoretical and practical reason. The force of Lichtenberg's challenge is in theoretical reason: it shows that it is theoretically undecidable whether I am an agent in thinking. This is consistent with recognizing, on practical grounds, an obligation to settle the propriety of my perspective. Speaking for myself, however, I find it hard to keep the two separate. If someone were to say, 'I don't know (and could not possibly know) whether my thoughts strike me like lightning, but I still have to decide what to believe on the basis of reasons', I would be puzzled. Not because the latter claim entails the negation of the former as a result of a chain of reasoning, but because it seems to be in immediate tension with the former.

Kant's own use of practical assent does not have this dialectical problem. Kant's starting point is very far from his theoretical claims: he begins with an obligation to obey the moral law, including pursuing

the highest good, and ends up with assent to the existence of God. If someone were to say, 'I don't know whether God exists, but I am still subject to the moral law', there wouldn't seem to be any immediate tension; as a result, the moral law can have some leverage in getting us to assent to God's existence.

To take stock: it seems to me that there are two valid arguments for the conclusion that I am an agent in thinking. There is a theoretical argument which starts from the phenomenon of reasoning, in which my own evaluation of the reasons bearing on a propositional attitude immediately leads me to revise that attitude: understanding this phenomenon requires thinking of myself as an agent. There is a practical argument which starts from my obligation to bring my propositional attitudes in line with my evaluation of the reasons bearing on them: I can pursue this end only if I think of myself as an agent. These two arguments are both valid, but in both cases, the distance between premises and conclusion seems very small; as a result, we might doubt that either of them has the dialectical leverage to respond to Lichtenberg's challenge.

### 3. Morals as a guide to metaphysics

I noted above that while Gomes' argument for taking ourselves to have agency in thinking seems to cross a very small distance, Kant's own use of practical assent does not have this problem. In this section, I will take a brief detour from my main line of argument to indicate the possibility of an alternative route, inspired by Kant's account, from agency to objectivity.

Gomes quickly dismisses the idea of starting with a moral obligation, saying that 'contemporary philosophers are likely to be wary of building substantive theses about the nature of morality into an account of the self-conscious subject' (2024, 93). This is why he instead starts from an epistemic obligation to settle the propriety of our beliefs. But I think there is more to be said here. While it does seem implausible that a substantive thesis about the nature of morality is built into the self-conscious subject, there may be a starting point that is moral but does not presuppose a substantive thesis. I'm thinking of our recognition of moral obligations to others. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch writes:

What is absolute and unconditional is what each man clearly and distinctly knows in his own soul, the difference between right and wrong. It is something intimate, deep in consciousness, inseparable from one's sense of oneself, like

the Cartesian sense of one's own existence and as directly grasped. Kant is confident that we all recognize it; and the man in the street, if untainted by theory, would probably assent at once to both ideas, to *cogito ergo sum* and to his ability to discern right from wrong. (1992, 439)

Murdoch is suggesting that a grasp of right and wrong in our relations to others is fundamental in subjects like us. Elsewhere, Murdoch characterizes the same phenomenon in terms of our relation to value. For Murdoch, this relation has to be 'included at the start' in an account of human existence; it cannot simply be 'accounted for later'.<sup>5</sup> Anything that could be accounted for later would not genuinely be a relation to value.

This suggests a different route from the practical self to the world. Like Gomes' argument, this one grounds objectivity in agency, but not the agency we exercise in thinking: rather, it is the agency we exercise in interacting with others. I am sure that I have duties to *this* person, for example, because I made them a promise. I might have theoretical doubts about the objective world, but they don't touch my sense of my duties to the particular others I am confronted with. And if I am sure that I owe a duty to *you* – because I made you a promise – then I must assent, on practical grounds, to the proposition that you are a person, because I can owe such a duty only to another person.<sup>6</sup> As a result, I must assent to the proposition that there are other persons. Like Gomes' conclusion, this is a proposition about an objective reality, if not necessarily a physical one. On this approach, what leads us out of isolation is not our intellectual agency but rather the agency we exercise in relating to others.

Of course, I've done no more here than indicate that an approach like this might be available; showing that it would work would require far more detail. Instead, I will return to Gomes' own line of argument from our agency in thinking.

#### 4. Faith and knowledge

I argued above that there are both theoretical and practical grounds for taking ourselves to have agency in thinking. The existence of both theoretical and practical grounds is a problem for Gomes, given his claim that we are only entitled to assent to a proposition on practical grounds if that

---

<sup>5</sup>Murdoch, Heidegger manuscript (unpublished), quoted in Dougherty (forthcoming, 11).

<sup>6</sup>For more on this way of thinking about morality, see Wallace (2019).

proposition is ‘theoretically undecidable’, in the sense that we could not have theoretical grounds for or against it. If there are theoretical grounds for accepting  $p$ , then the practical grounds for accepting  $p$  (should they exist) can play no justificatory role: they are, as it were, crowded out. In this section, I will argue that allowing theoretical and practical reason to interact would help with the dialectical issues identified earlier, and provide a more compelling approach to the inquiry as a whole.

Let’s start by elaborating on the claim that practical assent to  $p$  is available only where  $p$  is theoretically undecidable. This means that if I am going to practically assent to  $p$ , there must be no possible empirical evidence for or against  $p$ , nor any good arguments from purely conceptual knowledge to  $p$  or to the negation of  $p$ . In this sense, propositions to which I practically assent must be insulated from theoretical reason. Now, it does seem possible that there could be rational relations among the various propositions to which I practically assent: I might practically assent to  $p$ , and then, on the basis of  $p$ , to  $q$ . For example, having practically assented to the existence of God, I might infer that God has various characteristics. While practical commitments are insulated from theoretical reason, they are not insulated from each other. The resulting picture gives us two mutually insulated spheres: one sphere of propositions to which we assent for theoretical reasons, and another sphere of propositions to which we assent for practical reasons, but no rational interaction between the two spheres. In other words, Gomes’ account ends up with a very Kantian dualism between the domain of knowledge and the domain of faith. Faith is secure because it is insulated from knowledge.

In his early work *Faith and Knowledge* (1802/1977), Hegel suggested that Kant’s dualism is hard to sustain. I want to make two arguments loosely inspired by this suggestion. First, it seems unsatisfactory that the commitments we make on practical grounds can never push back against those we make on theoretical grounds. If I take myself to be entitled to assent to the proposition that I am an agent in my thinking, how could this not make a difference to my theoretical picture of the world? For example, doesn’t it give me reason to resist a theoretical account on which agency in thinking is impossible? It seems to me that if the claims we are entitled to practically assent to must be theoretically undecidable, then they can also make no impact in theoretical reason. To see why, suppose that I practically assent to  $p$ , and I already accept *if  $p$ , then  $q$* , so I conclude by theoretically accepting  $q$ . If this reasoning is possible, then it can also be ‘read backwards’: I could gain some theoretical



evidence against  $q$ , and this would give me theoretical reason to reject  $p$  – contrary to the assumption that  $p$  is theoretically undecidable. Even if the connection between  $p$  and  $q$  is weaker (suppose that my credence in  $q$  conditional on  $p$  is higher than my credence in  $q$  otherwise), it can be used to generate evidence bearing on  $p$  from evidence bearing on  $q$ . Unless such ‘reasoning backwards’ can be blocked, theoretical undecidability requires that the propositions I practically assent to make no theoretical impact.<sup>7</sup>

How can it be the case that these propositions make no theoretical impact? The answer may be that, given their mutual insulation, there are no cases in which I have practical grounds for accepting  $p$  and theoretical grounds for rejecting  $p$ . It is worth noting, however, that Kant’s basis for sharply separating the spheres of theoretical and practical reason is not available to Gomes, because it is bound up with Kant’s transcendental idealism. Transcendental idealism tells us that the world we relate to in experience is structured by our categories and forms of intuition; it is a world of appearances, not of things in themselves. Kant’s way of separating the spheres of theoretical and practical reason builds on this claim: theoretical reason is limited to knowledge of appearances, leaving a wide class of propositions – roughly, those about things in themselves – theoretically undecidable and thus available for practical commitment. In other words, Kant’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason is coextensive with a distinction of subject matters, helping to ensure that the propositions which practical reason entitles us to accept are insulated from those which theoretical reason entitles us to accept. Without recourse to idealism (which Gomes disavows), this way of carving out a class of theoretically undecidable propositions is unavailable.

Indeed, it is not clear that there is a class of theoretically undecidable propositions left, if by this we mean a class of propositions which theoretical reason gives us no reason to accept or reject. General principles about which kinds of entities we should posit, given the explanatory needs of our best-supported scientific theories, give us reasons (if not definitive ones) for accepting or rejecting propositions of the sort that might be supported by practical reason. For example, take the existence of an immortal soul, which Kant argues is theoretically undecidable and should be accepted on practical grounds. For Kant, the question

---

<sup>7</sup>At least by way of directly giving reason to believe a particular thing. Gomes might still allow that my practical assent to  $p$  could shape my theoretical beliefs in other ways, for example by raising or lowering the evidential threshold for forming a belief about a particular topic.

whether an immortal soul exists is beyond the scope of theoretical reason. By contrast, once we reject transcendental idealism, the claim that the soul exists is vulnerable to arguments about its lack of an explanatory role in scientific theories, or its inconsistency with general physical laws. Now, these are certainly not definitive arguments; it is open to a defender of the soul to claim that for one reason or another the soul does not have to meet these standards. The point is that there are, at least, theoretical *reasons* that bear on belief in the proposition.<sup>8</sup>

The same, I think, is true of our agency in thinking. However we make sense of the claim that we have this kind of agency, it is going to have to be compatible with other general claims about us, such as that human beings are animals which evolved in the same way as others, or that we, like other physical beings, are governed by the laws of physics. As a result, developments in theoretical reason might give us reason to accept or reject the proposition that we have agency in thinking, even if there is no definitive argument available.

Without transcendental idealism, then, it seems perfectly possible that we could have a practical obligation such that pursuing the obligation requires accepting  $p$ , while we have theoretical reasons against  $p$ . There are two ways Gomes might respond. The first, and to me less promising approach, would be to claim that a proposition  $p$  remains available for practical assent as long as the theoretical reasons bearing on  $p$  fail to meet some higher standard – for example, as long as we lack theoretical *knowledge* of  $p$  or its negation.<sup>9</sup> As long as we don't *know* on theoretical grounds that we are agents or that we are not agents, it is open to us to accept for practical reasons that we are agents, even though general theoretical principles might also bear on this proposition. I think this approach is ad hoc. Once we allow that theoretical and practical reason can both bear on some propositions, there is no principled basis for excluding practical reason altogether for propositions which are the subject of theoretical knowledge. Moreover, even if Gomes is right that the arguments of Burge and others do not give us such knowledge about agency in thinking, this approach is hostage to the possibility that a better argument might be made in the future.

---

<sup>8</sup>If there are propositions which theoretical reason is silent on (perhaps certain mathematical hypotheses, or claims about details of the past: see Dummett 2003, ch 3), it seems unlikely that this class includes the cases where practical assent is a reasonable attitude to take.

<sup>9</sup>We might also add a requirement that our evidence "render  $p$  at least as likely as any relevant alternative", as suggested by Chignell (2007, 342) in discussing a different but related form of practical assent.

The second approach would be to find a different way of separating theoretical from practical reason: one which doesn't require that propositions to which we practically assent be theoretically undecidable. Here, we might take a cue from recent work on cases in which we resolve to do something even though we have evidence that we will fail to do it.<sup>10</sup> For example, I might resolve to wake up at 6:00 tomorrow, but also know that I tend to snooze my alarm until 7:00. So, with respect to the proposition that I will wake up at 6:00, I have both practical grounds for accepting it (given that I have resolved to do it) and theoretical grounds for rejecting it (given my track record). One thing that is not tempting, here, is to maintain that whether I will wake up at 6:00 is theoretically undecidable: we can imagine my friends taking bets on whether I will wake up, and generating a theoretically well-supported view of the odds, perhaps approaching a certainty that I will not wake up on time.

In *Evidence and Agency* (2015), Berislav Marušić argues that the theoretical and the practical correspond to different grounds for taking something to be true. From a theoretical point of view, I form beliefs on the basis of epistemic reasons; from a practical point of view, I form commitments on the basis of what is worthwhile, obligatory or good. The issue is when a given standpoint is appropriate. For Marusic, the practical point of view is appropriate only for propositions concerning what I will do; theoretical undecidability is neither necessary nor sufficient to make it appropriate to assent to a proposition on practical grounds.<sup>11</sup> If an action is up to me, then I should not treat the question whether I will do it as a theoretical one; to treat it this way is itself a practical failure, namely *bad faith*. Instead, I have to decide whether to do it. It is not that theoretical reason is silent on whether I will wake up at 6:00 am; rather, treating this as a theoretical question is (for me) the wrong way to look at it, given that the decision is mine to make. Marusic's account thus allows for the existence of propositions for or against which there are both practical and theoretical reasons for assent, and it demarcates a class of propositions where we should assent according to our practical reasons, despite what theoretical reason says.

Gomes might accept, along similar lines, that theoretical reason does have something to say about whether I am an agent in thinking: how could it not? But when I am setting out to form my views on some

---

<sup>10</sup>Gomes does discuss Marušić (2015); I am suggesting that adopting an specific claim from that work might help solve a problem in Gomes' account.

<sup>11</sup>The limitation to propositions concerning what I will do also helps Marusic avoid the concern that practical assent is "a kind of wishful thinking" (Gomes 2024, 113).

topic, I should not treat it as a theoretical question whether I am the one who makes up my mind; for example, if I look to the empirical evidence to determine whether someone in my situation can decide what to believe on this topic, I fall into bad faith. Instead, given that I ought to settle the propriety of my perspective, I have to insist that this is what I am going to do. It is a little less clear whether it would also be bad faith to bring theoretical reason to bear on the further claim that I have agency in thinking, as this is not itself a claim about what I will do; perhaps the two claims are so closely tied together that I am also obligated to treat the question of my agency as a practical one rather than a theoretical one. (Similarly, it might be bad faith to look to theoretical evidence to determine whether I have agency in deciding whether to wake up at 6:00 am.)

This brings me to the second point. Gomes suggests that the reason for requiring theoretical undecidability as a precondition for practical assent is to avoid conflicts between theoretical and practical reason; drawing from Kant, he suggests that this reflects the unity of reason, which rules out ‘a conflict within reason itself’ (2024, 113). On this approach, theoretical and practical reason are unified by having disjoint subject-matters such that their outputs cannot conflict; they are like the governments of neighbouring provinces with separate territories. While I agree that reason forms a unity, I want to suggest that this can be understood in a different way. Theoretical and practical reason are unified in that they both give us reasons to hold propositions true or false. They are like two sources of law within a single jurisdiction. On this alternative approach, there is no guarantee in advance that theoretical and practical reason cannot conflict. Indeed, the fact that they can conflict is a manifestation of their unity. This poses a normative problem, given that we can take both points of view, and this problem is solved by determining when each standpoint is appropriate – for example, by precluding the use of theoretical reason to decide what I am going to do.

Conflict is not the only manifestation of the unity of reason. This unity is also displayed in our ability to combine theoretical and practical reason in drawing conclusions. As Jody Azzouni has written,

Inference, both in its narrowly deductive form, as well as in its confirmation-enhancing forms, is invariably language-wide in scope. Sentences, nearly enough, from any area of discourse, may be employed to deduce results. Related to this is that there are no restrictions on the vocabulary of either the premises of such inferences or their conclusions. ... This phenomenon is hardly restricted to mathematics and empirical science. The reason is that our evidential practices can utilize (nearly enough) truths from any subject area. (2018, 700)

This is also true of the deliverances of theoretical and practical reason. For example, I might reason:

1. I will make soup for dinner.
2. If I make soup for dinner, there will be no tomatoes left in the fridge tomorrow.
3. So there will be no tomatoes left in the fridge tomorrow.

Here, I accept premise 1 on practical grounds (because I have decided to make soup for dinner), while I accept premise 2 on theoretical grounds (because my tomato soup recipe will require all the tomatoes in the fridge). It seems that I am able to draw a theoretical conclusion from a combination of theoretical and practical premises.

Even if Marušić is right that we ought not take a theoretical point of view on whether we will perform actions that are up to us, then, it does not follow that my practical conclusion is theoretically inert. Rather, it can interact inferentially with my theoretical beliefs and lead me to draw further theoretical and practical conclusions. I suggested earlier that such interaction can lead to problems, because if we allow it to be ‘read backwards’, it can bring theoretical reason to bear on a practical question: for example, if I accept premise 2 above, and have theoretical reason to believe that there will be tomatoes left in my fridge tomorrow, can’t I conclude – on theoretical grounds – that I will not make soup for dinner? The solution might be that reasoning *from* practical premises to a theoretical conclusion is permissible, while reasoning from solely theoretical premises to a practical conclusion is impermissible, because only the latter involves bad faith.<sup>12</sup>

We might think of the resulting situation along the lines of Quine’s web of belief. Quine (1951) suggested that our beliefs form a web with logic and mathematics at its core, and empirically grounded beliefs at its periphery. But we might also think of the web as including propositions we assent to on practical grounds.<sup>13</sup> In this way, our practical commitments may put pressure on our theoretical beliefs by way of inferential interaction. For example, if I have practical grounds for taking myself to be an agent, that gives me reason to reject a theoretical account that purports to show that I’m not an agent. By the same token, arguments like those of Evans and Heidegger might show that certain theoretical

---

<sup>12</sup>This looks a bit like the barriers to entailment discussed by Russell (2023).

<sup>13</sup>See Srinivasan (2015) and Williamson (2019) for relevant discussion.

beliefs are available only if certain practical commitments are in place. On this approach, the connections Gomes draws between agency, reasoning and objectivity show that these ideas are closely tied together in the web, not that they are off limits for inquiry. Put differently, in making up our minds about how the world is, we are constrained by the commitments that are built in to engaging in that very activity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References

- Azzouni, J. 2018. "Pathological Pretending." *Analysis* 78 (4): 692–703. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/any058>.
- Bilgrami, A. 1998. "Self-Knowledge and Resentment." In *Knowing Our Own Minds: Essays in Self-Knowledge*, edited by C. Macdonald, Barry C. Smith, and C. J. G. Wright, 207–242. Clarendon Press.
- Burge, T. 1998. "Reason and the First Person." In *Knowing Our Own Minds: Essays in Self-Knowledge*, edited by C. Macdonald, Barry C. Smith, and C. J. G. Wright, 243–270. Clarendon Press.
- Chignell, A. 2007. "Belief in Kant." *The Philosophical Review* 116 (3): 323–360. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2007-001>
- Descartes, R. 1641/1996. *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dougherty, M. *Forthcoming*. "Murdoch on Heidegger. Philosophers'. Imprint".
- Dummett, M. 2003. *Truth and the Past*. Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, G. 1980. "Things without the Mind—A Commentary upon Chapter Two of Strawson's *Individuals*." In *Collected Papers*, edited by G. Evans, 249–290. Oxford.
- Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gomes, A. 2024. *The Practical Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1802/1977. *Hegel: Faith and Knowledge: An English Translation of G. W. F. Hegel's Glauben Und Wissen*. State University of New York Press.
- Heidegger, M. 1927/1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kant, I. 1786/1996. "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" In *Religion and Rational Theology*, edited by A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 1787/1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 1788/1996. "Critique of Practical Reason." In *Practical Philosophy*, edited by M. J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, C. M. 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marušić, B. 2015. *Evidence and Agency: Norms of Belief for Promising and Resolving*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Moran, R. A. 2001. *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Murdoch, I. 1992. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. New York: Penguin.
- Quine, W. V. O. 1951. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." *Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20–43.
- Rattan, G. 2002. "Tacit Knowledge of Grammar: A Reply to Knowles." *Philosophical Psychology* 15 (2): 135–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515080220127107>.
- Rödl, S. 2018. *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Russell, G. K. 2023. *Barriers to Entailment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Srinivasan, A. 2015. "Does Feminist Philosophy Rest on a Mistake? Lecture given at Kings College London MAP Conference." [https://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Research\\_files/Does%20Feminist%20Philosophy\\_KCL%20talk.pdf](https://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Research_files/Does%20Feminist%20Philosophy_KCL%20talk.pdf).
- Strawson, P. F. 1959. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London: Routledge.
- Wallace, R. J. 2019. *The Moral Nexus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Williamson, T. 2019. "Morally Loaded Cases in Philosophy." In *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 93.