

The Fragility of the Self and the Immortality of the Soul

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Introduction

The question, “Who am I?” is unavoidable. However, it is also, ultimately, unanswerable. When I say it is “unavoidable”, I do not mean that it is always pressing on us, at the front of our minds. We might avoid it most of the time. And even when the question comes up, it often stands in connection with other, apparently superficial questions. But when it presents itself, it provokes a reaction. This reaction can play out in various ways. One can search for an explicit answer and hope that it will be able to satisfy the question. Or, one might intuit that a final answer is not possible and therefore try to dismiss the question as without meaning or as incorrectly posed. Yet again, one can develop techniques that enable one to distance oneself from the question and thereby obtain some relief from the anxiety that often accompanies it. (The question “Who are you” is, comparatively, much easier to answer. We can respond to the one who asks our name, our lineage, the stages of our life etc., but all these answers are relative to the contexts in which the question arises. The immigration officer normally does not want to know the whole of my history. But even if I try to reconstruct my history, I will not come to terms. The “I” that tells his or her story always represents more than can be told.)

In this paper, I will attempt to more closely describe this constellation. The question, “Who am I?”, presents itself, but it does not allow itself to be answered. But precisely this “un-answerability” might allow us to think about the idea of the immortality of the soul in a new way.

I. The fragility of the self

The first task is to understand more precisely the aporetic structure that appears with the question, “Who am I?” For this reason, it makes sense to acquire as exact an understanding as possible of the concepts involved in asking the question and, therefore, in reflecting on it. I distinguish among the concepts of the “I,” “self-consciousness,” “subjectivity,” and “self” in the following way:

1. The meaning of the word “I” develops most clearly in the use of language. A competent speaker of a language can carry-on well with personal pronouns and distinguish the use of the words “you” or “he,” “she,” and “it” from the word “I.” From the internal perspective of the speaker, a difference exists between the one who *makes* a statement, the one *to whom* the statement is directed, and the *subject matter* concerning which the statement is made. This structure is reflected in the phenomenon that when a person speaks, he or she is aware of speaking. If we look at this awareness more closely, we see that it implies that a speaker knows that his or her speaking, with the help of the language, can itself become a topic of speech. And in this sense, the meaning of “I” re-asserts and re-creates itself anew in every speech-act.

2. If one then asks about the conditions under which we might refer to the “self” as speaker, then we come to the phenomenon of self-consciousness. Namely, it must be possible to distance oneself from the spoken statement in order to identify that statement as one just produced by me. But for that to be possible, two conditions must obtain: On the one hand, a speaker must differentiate him- or herself from the performance of his or her *statement*. On the other hand, in making this distinction, one is referring to the relationship of speaker and statement to one another – that is, to the relationship that constitutes the speaker as *speaker*. The awareness of that relationship is what I mean by “self-consciousness.” Self-consciousness is also characterized by the difference between intentional consciousness in relation to *oneself* as opposed to *other persons and things* (that is, the mental correspondences for the use of personal pronouns). Note that self-consciousness in this sense is associated with the capacity to make oneself responsible for connecting various statements.

3. Focusing specifically on self-consciousness as the background of the use of the pronoun “I” brings us to the structure of “subjectivity.” Self-consciousness that arises in using the pronoun “I,” is claimed as being individually “mine.” However, this is generally the case for any speaker. Each individual self-consciousness is wholly different from every other, empirically speaking. But in these different self-consciousnesses, filled out with different content in unique social and natural environments, an identical structure nevertheless comes to the fore: namely, the fundamental relatedness to the self. Although it is always newly actualized under diverse empirical conditions, there is a common structure of relatedness to oneself, which proves to be universal and constant despite any empirical difference. This is the condition for the possibility of being able to recognize other persons as “like me.” The self-consciousness of another, though factually differentiated from mine, contains and seeks to realize the same structure of “subjectivity-as-self-relation.” The structure of “subjectivity” does not exist “in itself” but is “brought about” in specific places and times; at the same time, it is already latently present before any completed performance of the individual self-consciousness.

I suggest that the expression “the self” should be understood as the interconnection of (1) the spoken articulation (“I”) with (2) the individual consciousness of each speaker (self-consciousness) and (3) the structure used and presupposed by consciousness, namely, “subjectivity.” For the expression “the self” implies a structural recursiveness, which makes the differentiation between oneself and others possible (3). Every “self” must be able to be recognized and “owned” from an internal perspective looking out (2). This internal perspective is articulated linguistically by the statements one makes, as they are being made (1).

With the foregoing differentiation now in place, the fragility of the self may likewise be characterized in three ways. Specifically, three distinct contingencies emerge. (1) I call the first contingency that of *facticity*. It has its place in the performance of speech. Although I in no way invent the language in which I live and move, I nevertheless do have to use it for myself. And this use means that I apply the linguistic structures of the language in this way or that; or I can also remain silent instead of speaking. But the locating of the “I” first takes place in the web of language in relationship to other moments and relations of language. (2) The second contingency can be called that of *quantity*. Psychological self-consciousness (or self-awareness) that produces connections among my statements for me, through which they can be accounted to me from outside, must be strong enough to assert itself in a variety of as-yet-undetermined situations and various environments. That is why we speak of a weak or strong (psychological) self-consciousness. (3) The third contingency is that of *reflexivity*. Here, where we are again concerned with the structure of subjectivity, the phenomenon of being able to distinguish between myself and others appears. This distinction is now of a different kind than that which I make among things and circumstances, as described above. The difference is that I have to be able to trace such identifications of things and objects *back to myself*. This *reflexivity* assists with making distinctions of an objective sort but does not *derive* from the practice of making those distinctions. To the contrary: every distinction *presupposes* an already existing difference between the relation to oneself and the relationship with others.

In all three respects, the self proves itself to be a fragile form. The *facticity* of the “in this way or another” or of the “not now” is unavoidable. It can happen or not. The *quantity* of self-consciousness fluctuates and is dependent on many intersubjective and objective factors. The *reflexivity* of subjectivity is a precondition, which I am always “inhabiting” without ever fully knowing its origins or heritage.

Insight into this fragility is intensified still more when one understands that one cannot do without any of these three moments. Speaking belongs to our form of being (*Dasein*) as humans. Self-consciousness is implied in it. And subjectivity is the structure that I claim and obtain in both.

All of this helps one to understand better why the self is often regarded as less permanent. The foregoing observations seem to recommend an understanding of the self as a phenomenon to be suspended. Unless, of course, one could show that exactly this fragility constitutes its specific character. But if that is the case, then this fragile character must be more carefully analyzed and grounded. My thesis is that one can identify such a foundation by critically re-situating the discourse on the self in forms normally categorized under "The Immortality of the Soul."

II. The Immortality of the Soul

You might wonder whether I am now going to propose a way out of the foregoing observations concerning the fragility of the self that seems to retreat into an unchangeable substance. This is definitely not what I propose! For I am convinced, to the contrary, that every theory of the *immortality of the soul* must stand by our perceptions of the *problem of the self* – not the other way around. All prominent conceptions of the immortality of the soul deal with this issue and attempt to work over it critically. I will illustrate my thesis with three prominent examples.

The first example is, naturally, Plato's theory. The opening question, as is well-known, concerns the validity of truth-claims beyond the bounds of their contexts. Such validity is only possible if we are able to distinguish between the *appearances* in which the world encounters us and the *truth* appearing in them. The most difficult challenge for the capacity of distinction is the distinction between life and death. Death is a cipher for all that is past, for the world of appearances in general. To what extent can *we* – as living beings – make this distinction between life and death? According to Plato in the *Phaedo*, only to the extent that we ourselves are oriented to that which is abiding, or in other words, *that which comes to appearance in appearances*. We must, for our part, have a share of the abiding and true in this world to a certain extent, if only in the sense that we – as beings still living in the world of appearances – orient ourselves toward that which abides and then accept and apply this orientation and its objects as a measure for analyzing the world around us. In making this distinction, we attempt to discern what in us might have a share in that which is lasting or permanent. The so-called platonic "Ideas" represent those moments in every communication that are assumed ungraspable in one's own individuality. Indeed, the platonic conception is animated by this contrast. It is always developed by fixing the permanent in opposition to the apparent.

Because of this, however, the status of the apparent always remains underdetermined. Above all else, Plato's theory implies that the validation of the per-

manent requires the individual lives of every person be taken into account in their respective facticities. But this necessity remains undeveloped. In the end, Plato's theory will not work without the assistance of an explanatory myth that can identify permanence despite the co-existence of variation in the world of appearances. It also needs a conception of a transmigration of souls by means of which these individual, particular lives should be sustained.

Differently than for Plato, with Kant it is the individuality of distinctions and decisions that forms the starting point. In the background stands the conviction that the kind of permanence characteristic of truth cannot be achieved by the path of claims concerning the world of appearances, but rather through claims concerning human self-determination in the world and in opposition to the world. Further, it is not possible, for Kant, that one might be able to recognize one's own internal self as permanent in an intuitive-introspective way. Rather, through regular relation to oneself *in light of the moral law*, one coordinates one's particular actions to that which has general validity. In the impulse that is given with an individual's own self-determination, one expresses oneself in the consciousness of freedom, according to which one is required to be able to connect one responsible act to another. The acting subject confirms the existence and validity of the moral law ever anew through its action, as it acts according to the moral law as a norm in the world; in a way, the subject *obtains* itself directly through such action.

This doubled perspective – that, on the one hand, the authority of the moral law is a norm for action and that, on the other hand, it is impossible to get “behind” the world of sense perception and that the sensory world alone is the place for action – this doubled perspective is responsible both for the accomplishments as well as the complications of Kant's theory. As certain as responsible action follows the moral law and not the impressions and attractions of the sensory world, so much should the result of action not end in some utopian emptiness: The *moral* must also be experienced as that which makes one *happy*. This fundamental principle, without which there can be no moral *obligation*, produces two important results. First, it leads to the idea of the immortality of the soul: the inner human person is so definitely beholden to the law, that not even the empirical end of human life can form an argument against it. Second, the principle leads to the idea of God, who alone (re-)presents the unification of morality and happiness. So much for the accomplishments of Kant's model. Its difficulties arise in this same interconnection of points. Namely, insofar as duty always refers to action, the empirical world of sense remains a necessarily permanent element of understanding the immortality of the soul, at least conceptually. And the idea of God first comes into play in the analysis at the point of the unity of morality with sensibility. One must, however, be able to regard God not only as the resolution of this tension, but already as its ground. That is not possible in Kant's theory.

The third example to discuss here transplants Kant's moral grounding of the immortality of the soul into existential soil, going beneath action to the being of the human itself. Ludwig Feuerbach's *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* considers the possibility that human finitude is not determined primarily by its relationship to the world of sense or nature; these relationships do not capture the unique individuality of the human. The unique individuality of the human person presents itself, rather, in the relationship of the finite to the infinite as its categorical Other. More specifically, it seems that in this relationship the finite, in opposition to the infinite, renounces the desire to be something in itself. The finite lifts, suspends and overcomes itself in the infinite. This, of course, presupposes that the infinite is also present in the finite. The self-overcoming finite is thus the concrete form of the infinite. The natural mode of existence of the finite interweaves this relationship throughout. In other words, the finite, being always "this" or "that" specific finite thing, will by definition always have its own unique medium of self-presentation in natural-sensory existence. Feuerbach accepts that the finitude of the human being is determined through the relationship to the infinite, or divine, so that sensory-bodily existence forms the horizon of an intuitive presentation of the self. As a consequence, however, human finitude, so clearly manifest in death, is not the end of the human; death is the repose of the finite in the infinite. In death, the finite realizes its true essence, namely, to be one with the infinite. Note, however, what results in consequence: In the end, it is no longer possible to differentiate between finite human being and nature as the external Other of the infinite. The negation of life through death annuls the special position of the human. Though it gains itself in the moment of self-negation, the human being becomes one with the infinite in the same move, and as a result it is the external form of the infinite is in a way no different than the whole of nature. Here Feuerbach's later naturalism appears already in his early work.

I have summarized three models of the immortality of the soul as the center of the human's life: namely the discernment of the permanent in the apparent, the identification of happiness in duty through application of the moral law, the union of the finite self with the infinite. In each of these, the unique quality of the soul is secured through operational processes. The notion of a substantial identity of the soul is nowhere part of the discussion. Much to the contrary, being woven into processes that remain in the task of coming to terms with something other ensures, in each of the three cases mentioned, that it is not possible to speak of something unconditioned in relation to the human self. (1) The identity of the soul for Plato presupposes the process of determination by appearances. (2) The activity of the subject for Kant is understood in the determination of the sensible world on a path of ethical action. (3) And even the existential being of the human, with Feuerbach, always requires an Other – initially the infinite, but then also mediated by nature.

My treatment so far of these three theories on the immortality of the soul can be summarized in the following way: All three in their various ways “evidence” a fragility of the soul, and all attempt to establish a higher permanence in opposition to this fragility. This permanence consists in participation in the ideas (for Plato), in orientation to the moral law (for Kant), and finally in the existential position of the human being in relation to the infinite (for Feuerbach). For Plato, this takes the form of statements grasping the permanence of truth in the field of appearances; for Kant, the responsible self-assertion of rational human beings in the world; for Feuerbach, finitude that establishes itself dialectically through relation to the infinite. All three theories function by positing a duality and then overcoming that duality. Because they proceed from this constellation, however, none of these conceptions are able to capture the definiteness in the idea of immortality to any radical degree. A radical conception would be one that tries not to reduce the fragility of the self but one that lets both go altogether and in this way learns to understand the self as such. That will only work, however, if the whole structure of duality *and* its being overcome can be left behind. Now, as I conclude, I will make just such an attempt.

III. Immortality and Fragility

It is helpful to consider the three moments of the self’s fragility, we discerned above, in connection with those ungovernable qualities that appear in each of them. (1) Speaking, which brings the use of the “I” to the fore, presupposes an individual process of learning using various forms of a language, differing by place and culture. Empirical influences of linguistic forms are high, even though a speaker is not able to produce the structures of the language intentionally. (2) The self-consciousness, which stands in the background of the speaking-“I,” conducts itself in relationship with other subjects who have their own self-consciousnesses and who stand on the horizon of a communal world, which must come to be known and processed inter-subjectively. Like the speaking-“I”, self-consciousness is also interwoven with empirical conditions which form its life context to a great extent; here, too, it is the case that most of these conditions cannot be changed according to individual desire, but require that individual persons naturalize their integration and participation in their empirical contexts. (3) Subjectivity presents itself in a different way. For here, there is no empirical process of experience and learning by virtue of which the distinctive characteristic of subjectivity – namely, its reflexivity or self-relatedness – forms. Rather, the issue is that, *in* all of those empirically mediated moments of the self, the structure of reflexivity is *presupposed* and *in use*. So where does it come from? This is the question one must answer if one wants to understand more precisely the phenomenon of the self.

Indeed all attempts to answer this question find themselves trapped in the unique difficulty that they must presuppose that which they are seeking to ground. (1) For every claim concerning the contents of subjectivity distinguishes between "I" as *subject* of the claim and the claimed *content*. (2) Likewise with self-consciousness, which is responsible for connecting "this" statement of mine with "that" one, that is, with other statements about other situations. The work of connecting statements to one another means, however, that self-consciousness cannot in anyway be said to be responsible for the origin of this reflexivity – at least not in a way that *it* might be called the cause and *reflexivity* the effect. (3) In this way the characteristic of unconditionedness belongs to subjectivity.

And yet the question of the source of subjectivity cannot be silenced if the phenomenon of the self is to be understood. We must interpret the situation in which we always meet the phenomenon of being acquainted with oneself without having produced this acquaintance. We do not have any possibility to develop or derive this phenomenon from elsewhere, as all demonstration or deduction presupposes the fact that we ourselves are the subjects of demonstration or deduction. That is why the procedure of interpretation is the only way to deal with the problem of self-acquaintance. And all interpretations which are possible follow the same structure, namely to transcend our normal dealing with the world; in this sense, all interpretations of that kind can be named religious. Interpreting the fact that we always meet ourselves as presupposed, without any preceding conditions, justifies the interpretation that what touches us in our being ourselves is the unconditioned itself.

The *unconditioned* itself, therefore, is the only thing that comes into view in answer to this question. The name for the unconditioned is "God." Obviously, as a treatment of the ground of subjectivity, this crosses over into the realm of religion or religious speech. And although, in a certain sense, symbolic language now replaces tight concept-based argumentation, this symbolic speech uses a precise logic of its own. Naturally, whenever one takes up a religious perspective, one always acts and speaks in a historically positive manner – and not, in other words, from any ahistorical privileged vantage point. One can only ever speak from one's own religious perspective. Still, one may hope that what is observable from one's own religious perspective on the present topic might also be understandable and meaningful, at least analogically, for other religious persons, insofar as each religion concerns itself with the problem of the self.

The Christian religion has an "inclusive character." By this I mean that in the Christian religion individual self-understandings are oriented toward an inclusive horizon. The religious perspective combines the three levels of the self that I have been describing. (1) On the level of language, religion expresses itself in an individual's taking initiative to speak. More specifically, I feel prompted to speak, for what I feel compelled to say stems from my

humanity itself, and I am entitled to speak of this and to say what makes sense to me. This can be called the *conviction of conscience*. (2) On the level of self-consciousness, religion presents itself as a religious self-consciousness in the world. Through careful self-awareness, I perceive that, through all of my elative and burdensome goings about in the world, I am known by God. That awareness then makes an impression on all of my action in the world. For I then understand the world which surrounds me as a place presented to me by God. In this way, I also understand the *world itself as grounded in God*. (3) The level of subjectivity finally comes into play as an awareness of a feeling of *ultimate trust in God* – a trust that I know to be, in the end, independent from strengths and qualities of my own feeling because I understand it as coming from God. God is more than I can feel.

But it is necessary to describe this Christian religious awareness more precisely. Namely, so that the human person may find itself being addressed by God in the world, for it is this that grounds one's feeling of being an individual. One might describe this process of being addressed as the dimension of the unconditioned opening itself in-and-by-means-of human language and leading us to (3) the ground of the being of the self. Thereby, however, this unconditionedness of subjectivity exhibits a key relationship to (2) self-consciousness and (1) the linguistic "I." Its point of origin is the moment of one's own speech that realizes itself and its final preconditions by means of religious language. The basic understandings of Christian religious language can be interpreted in light of this relationship between subjectivity, self-consciousness, and the "I": the word of God, the divine Trinity, the sin of human beings, Jesus Christ as revelation of God, the Holy Spirit as the presence of God among men.

The line of argument I have followed suggests a new proposal for how the fragility of the self and the immortality of the soul might relate to one another – indeed, that they actually can only be understood in and through one another.

The unconditionedness of subjectivity (namely, reflexivity) presents itself through its relationship to God who is the unconditioned itself. Every person who lives in and with the structure of subjectivity and its fundamental unconditionedness is bound unconditionally to God. This status is mediated in and by the worlds in which we live. *This* is what I call the immortality of the soul. So it is clear that I do not mean any kind of substantial permanent individuality, but an intensive structure of relationship, or relational structure.

This structure of subjectivity can only be grasped and formed in an active way in connection with the world of appearances. At the same time, existence in the world – that is, the embodied, ensouled human mode of life – is not a condition of the possibility of being connected with God. Death as the end of embodied, ensouled existence is not to be presented as the end of connection with God. Death cannot separate from God.

Neither can sickness nor bodily injury. Not even the loss of the ability to communicate or act, the breakdown of spontaneity and power of choice – that is, the breakdown of all indicators of an active use of the “I” by means of which subjectivity brings itself to presentation – not even these great losses can eliminate one’s connection to God. In this way what I am calling the immortality of the soul informs our understanding of the self in its experience of sickness, dying, and death. So much for the theme of immortality.

Inseparable from this topic, however, is the empirical fragility of the self which has been present throughout my inquiry. It is exactly as a human person addressed by God that the human being must live in this world. In this condition there is the necessity to push oneself ever anew to active engagement with others in the world, that is to validate, confirm, actualize one’s own activity through linguistic participation in the whole of worldly, communal life. The result is that the *conditions* determining the forms of action in which we participate – whether restrictive or enabling – and the *contexts* in which we live are co-constitutive. As long as we live, we never end the process of positioning ourselves in the social and natural world. The physical and existential necessity of being an active being and the world’s constitution as a space of intersubjective forms give the empirical impression of the fragility of the self. But they refer us back to a still more fundamental shatteredness of the self. This is grounded in the reality that the self owes its being wholly to God, that is, the understanding that we are in no way self-made and self-preserving, however freely we go about in the world. Whoever understands this basis of the fragility of the self, also sees in it infinite relationship with God and eternal life.