***Reading Rödl: On* Self-Consciousness and Objectivity**, edited by James F. Conant and Jesse M. Mulder. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. Pp. ix + 432.

In his 2007 book, *Self-Consciousness*, Sebastian Rödl presents his topic—that of first-person thought—as 'a manner of thinking of an object, or a form of reference' to a particular thing (Rödl 2007, p. vii). That inquiry, as he understands it there, concerns 'a form of knowledge, which is knowledge of oneself as oneself', or a special manner 'of knowing how things stand with [a certain] object' (ibid.) —namely, the object that one is. Since we self-conscious subjects are human beings, our own first-personal knowledge is therefore 'a manner of knowing a material substance' (ibid., p. 126)—though not in virtue of the receptive, empirical relationship we may bear to material substances other than ourselves, but rather in virtue of *being* the material, spontaneously self-knowing substances that we are.

A decade later, in *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism*, Rödl rejects what he now calls the 'lingering naturalism' of that earlier work (p. 405), which he roots in the 'dogmatic presupposition' (p. 403, fn. 115) that 'I' is a word that makes reference. (Here, and in what follows, unmarked references are to essays in the volume under review.) By his present lights, that earlier position is naturalist, not because it was materialist or otherwise reductive, but insofar as it 'places thought among the objects of theoretical knowledge and in this sense in nature' (p. 342). To think this way is to think that there are 'powers that are a given nature of the subjects who possess them and yet are powers to represent reality, how things are, the world' (Rödl 2018, p. 57). And Rödl now holds that this 'conjunction of the idea of a natural power with the idea of knowledge yields gibberish' (ibid.).

The present volume comprises seventeen critical essays on *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity* (hereafter '*SC&O*'), together with an introduction by Jesse M. Mulder and a lengthy (over 90-page) set of replies from Rödl. Most of the essays come from a position of general sympathy with Rödl's idealism, at least in some form—which feels like a missed opportunity given how startling the position sounds from the perspective of contemporary analytic philosophy. But there is much to be learned from reading them. Given the scope of the issues they raise, my discussion here will focus on one important thread that runs through a number of the essays, namely the question of whether Rödl's anti-naturalism can accommodate the evident fact that at least some of the subjects of thought and judgment are individual human beings.

This evident fact is not one Rödl means to question. As he writes in his replies, in refusing to distinguish 'logical from empirical *I*, thought thinking itself from I thinking myself', *SC&O* does not thereby 'represent[] the subject as a pure spirit':

> On the contrary. Its first sentence runs: 'Thinking that such-and-such is the case is an act of a subject'. There is no indication that a subject should be something other than John, say, or Bob, or Michael. (p. 396; quoting *SC&O*, p. 1)

So it is a human being, say Angela, who is the subject of the thought that such-and-such is the case—the thought that *p*. In thinking this, Angela also thinks that s*he herself* (she*, in Castañeda's (1966) formalism) thinks that *p*—that is, Angela thinks what she might express with the English sentence:

(1) I think that *p*.

However, Rödl holds that 'I' in Angela's mouth (or mind) does not make reference to a particular person, and indeed that Angela's thought of (1) does not contain anything that is not already contained within the simple thought, '*p*'. Therefore, the thought that Angela would express with (1) is no different from the thought that any other speaker of English would express with the same. In her consciousness of herself as one who thinks that *p*, Angela is not conscious of a particular person to the exclusion of any others. And with this, Angela's self-consciousness seems to lose any connection to her individuality. As Glenda Satne puts it in her contribution to this volume:

> It might … seem that, in thinking it to be valid that things are thus and so, no given person [i.e., 'no person as opposed to others' (p. 137)] is thought. Persons as particular individuals do not enter the consideration of her who thinks, and she who thinks in the first person does not think of herself as one among many subjects or beings, or as someone with senses, a body, a set of sensorial and motor capacities that disclose the world for her. The first person that thinks is no person. (p. 136)

Likewise Dawa Ometto:

> When we embrace the insight that the 'I think' is internal to what is thought, we lose the ability to distinguish between what explains *your* thinking it and what explains *my* thinking it, for there are no two distinct acts. In what is thought (*p*), we can therefore find no distinction between your exercise of the power and mine. (p. 262)

Again, however, Rödl means to preserve the ordinary idea that the self-conscious thinker *is* a human individual, someone such as Angela, John, Bob, or Michael. The challenge is to square this with the claim that, in thinking herself as thinking, this human being does not think of herself as a particular thinking subject to the exclusion of others.

One response to this challenge would be to go back to the position Rödl took in *Self-Consciousness*, according to which first-person thoughts do make reference to the person thinking them, though in such a way that it is no accident that the thinker is one and the same as she of whom she thinks. (That is, it is in virtue of *being F* that the self-conscious thinker thinks of herself as *F*, rather than through the kind of connection that one must bear to a different person in order to think of her as such.) In his contribution, Adrian Haddock explains why this will not do:

> Suppose that someone thinks in the first-personal manner introduced [in Rödl's earlier book]. And call the one he thereby thinks of '*NN*'. As the one he thinks of is *NN*, it follows that the one who thinks of him is equally *NN*: only *NN* can think of *NN* in the first-personal manner. But if to think what *NN* thinks in thinking that *p* is to think what *NN* could express by saying 'I think that *p*', and as such to think of *NN* in the first-personal manner, then, because only *NN* can think of *NN* in this manner, only *NN* can think what *NN* thinks in thinking that *p*. And what goes for *NN* goes for everyone. Everyone is locked in his own, windowless world. (p. 308)

In other words, if the self-consciousness that is internal to thinking that *p* involved thinking of a particular person as thinking this, then what a given person thinks in thinking that *p* would be different from what anyone else thinks in thinking—what was supposed to be—the same. Indeed, since each such person will think of herself in a manner that no one else can share, each person's manner of self-consciously thinking that *p* will involve a thought that is in principle out of reach of anyone else. In this manner of attempting to save the individuality of the self-conscious thinker, we lose our hold on the generality of what is thought.

The challenge, again, was to understand how first-person thought, though it does not make reference to the person whose thought it is, nevertheless *is* the thought of such a person—a human being, such as Angela—and, furthermore, is a way in which such a person thinks *of herself*. As Angela is one human being among others, it might seem that her thought of herself should be thought of this *particular* human: Angela's thought of herself should be thought of Angela, in contrast to John's thought of himself, which is thought of John. Yet Rödl denies this, saying that it 'cannot be right' that in self-conscious thought 'more is thought than judgment, namely, a particular, the one who thinks' (p. 395). And our worry was that this denial risks either severing the connection between the act of thinking and the subject whose act it is supposed to be, or restricting that subject to, as Martijn Wallage puts it in his excellent contribution, 'a pure spirit or intellect' (p. 326). As Rödl voices the objection in his replies:

> When we paste over the fact that the first-person pronoun introduces a human being, we obscure a crucial difference. I said self-consciousness is thought thinking itself. Yet *SC&O* speaks of self-consciousness as the *I think*. This is misleading, for a first-person thought is a thought of the thinker as thinker, and thought thinking itself is not the thinker thinking herself. I am not thought. Thought is something general: a power or a predicate. A thinker, I, am a particular: someone who possesses the power or satisfies the predicate. In consequence, the thinker is not exhausted by the idea of her as a thinker. This describes her through one of her predicates. It may be a central or even an essential one. It may even be her form. Yet she who thinks, in my case and in yours, is a human being, breathing and eating and walking and sweating. The reminder that it is a human being who thinks is an anti-dote to the unwholesome abstraction that reduces the fullness of the human being and her life to the shadow of a thinker, worse, the thinker, worse still, thought. (p. 395)

The objector is supposed to have gone wrong at some point. But where is her error? At a couple of places in his replies, Rödl points to the discussion of perceptual judgment in chapter 7 of *SC&O* as a place where the thinker's bodily character, and therefore her individuality, makes an appearance in his account of judgment. There, Rödl argues that the validity of 'judgment with contrary'—that is, judgment that is not valid in itself, but that must be validated by something further—can only be comprehended through a power to know that depends on sensory affection. In judgment of this kind, she who judges must understand her judgment as arising from 'a power of knowledge involving the affection of specific senses':

> When someone asks why I think *A*, and this is a judgment of perception, I can answer: I can see (or saw), or hear (or heard), or feel (or felt), that *A*. In so answering, I represent my judgment as an act of the power to know through a specific sense or senses. … I do not go beyond that

> which I understand in judging what I do; I articulate an understanding internal to my judgment: the thought of it as an act of the power to acquire knowledge through perception. (*SC&O*, pp. 106-107)

The self-consciousness of one who judges with contrary includes a consciousness of herself as one whose senses are, or have been, affected in some way by what is outside her. This must be right: but it seems to increase the difficulty rather than resolving it. For *that* consciousness is a consciousness of a human individual—of a person 'breathing and eating and walking and sweating', of 'someone with senses, a body, a set of sensorial and motor capacities that disclose the world for her'. And this seems impossible, if the thinker's 'I' does not relate to her as a particular object. As Haddock asks:

> Thinking that *p* is doing something expressible by saying 'I think that *p*'. But thinking a demonstrative thought, in particular, is thinking something expressible by saying 'I perceive that *G*, and think it to be *F*'. And in the latter, 'I' must in some sense locate the perceiving subject in the same world – specifically, in the same space – as the demonstrated object. The subject of empirical knowledge must, in some sense, be 'in the world'. But how can this be, if 'I' is not a referring term? (p. 314)

Since some of my thoughts require empirical validation, I must understand myself to be in space and to be able to be affected by things around me. In this understanding, I am conscious of myself as 'here, and there, physical, and in motion' (Rödl, p. 405). This bodily self-consciousness is not a knowledge of something given, say through some special faculty of inner sense: instead, 'the thinker's knowledge of her physical articulation into members is self-knowledge' (Rödl, p. 408). So far this is similar to Elizabeth Anscombe's position in 'The First Person', which is a main inspiration for Rödl's denial that the word 'I' makes reference. In that essay, Anscombe considers first-person thoughts like 'I am sitting', 'I am writing', 'I am going to stay still', and 'I twitched', writing that these:

> are examples of reflective consciousness of states, actions, motions, etc., not of an object I mean by 'I' but of this body. These I thoughts (allow me to pause and think some!) … are unmediated conceptions (knowledge or belief, true or false) of states, motions, etc., of this object here, about which I can find out (if I don't know it) that it is E.A. About which I did learn that it is a human being. (Anscombe 1981, p. 34; ellipsis in original)

For Anscombe, then, '[s]elf-knowledge is knowledge of the object that one is, of the human animal that one is' (ibid.), though this object is not something that is meant, or referred to, in a thinker's use of 'I'. This was the position Rödl developed in *Self-Consciousness*, save for his adherence to the 'dogmatic presupposition' that the word 'I' makes reference. Now, however, Rödl insists that 'the determinacy of the thinker cannot be comprehended in a thought of the form *I am this animal*' (p. 405, fn. 126). Indeed:

> If the answer to the question 'what is it?' gives the principle of operation of that which it addresses, then the answer to 'what am I?' is 'I am thought, I am knowledge'. And knowledge is not a kind because it is the universal idea. I am of no kind. (pp. 405-406)

And again:

> It is in thinking myself thinking that I think the universal. The universal idea is the idea of myself. There is no thinking myself that is not this universality. In every use of *I*, I reject the idea of myself as an instance of a kind and understand my determinacy as the determinacy of the universal idea. (p. 406)

I understand what it means to say that thought (νοῦς, *intellectus*) is the principle of operation of the human being—and also that, since thought cannot depend for its validity on any given character of she who thinks, it cannot be the specifically human character of the human intellect that explains our capacity to know. But aren't I still a particular instance of this general kind: human? And isn't the human just one kind of animal, and one kind of rational creature? (In correspondence, Rödl indicates that he would deny these supposed truisms, at least stated in this manner. For relevant discussion, see Rödl (2020), (2023), and (2024). I regret that I cannot consider these writings in detail in this review.)

As J.M. van Ophuijsen notes in his contribution (pp. 184-185), there is an affinity at this point between Rödl's position and that of Averroes (Ibn Rushd), the great Islamic thinker who famously argued that there is only one intellect that is shared by all human beings. (For a systematic presentation of Averroes' position, see Ogden (2022).) One of the most illuminating sections in Rödl's replies comes when he reflects on Anscombe's consideration of that position in one of her late essays, 'Has Mankind One Soul: An Angel Distributed Through Many Bodies?'. Here is how Anscombe explains the motivation behind the Averroist view, which has its source in Book III of Aristotle's *De Anima*:

> The intellect frames or somehow receives general concepts. If these general concepts are to be found in a lot of particular intellects, then they are not general: one could find particular examples of a general concept in all the particular intellects that had it. The general concept would have a particular instantiation in the individual intellect. But that conflicts with what the intellect is supposed to have; it grasps universals, the content of general terms like 'cockroach', 'square root', 'relation'. The difficulty would be avoided if there was one big intellect which was doing the thinking whenever any thinking of an intellectual sort was going on in separate human beings. (Anscombe 2005, p. 24)

Anscombe then says that when this last position is combined with the idea that 'the intellectual principle in the soul is the differentia of the human being', it yields the conclusion that 'we are all one human being'—a consequence that she finds 'too absurd to be credited':

> If so, then the human soul, even in its character of being an intellectual principle, cannot be like an angel distributed through many bodies. If the intellectual character is the differentia of the human animal, then it is the intellectual soul that is the form of this living thing. This means

> that the thinking and understanding human being *is* individuated like other animals by the spatiality and spread-out-ness of his existence which allows for many individuals with the same form. (ibid., p. 25; emphasis in original)

Rödl writes of this last sentence that 'Once this is laid down, then there is no solution' (p. 414). Why? He tells us that Anscombe's mistake lies in 'supposing that the determinacy of the thinker is provided from outside the determinacy of what she thinks' (p. 415)—that is, by the 'externality of space', understood as something 'introduced from outside the universal idea' (p. 417). If I read him correctly, Rödl's objection is that while 'spatiality and spread-out-ness' certainly belongs to the existence of a human being, it cannot be 'the difference of one thing in space from another' (ibid.) that explains how there can be a manifold of human thinkers, since spatiality is not something outside of thought that could provide such a principle of individuation.

I don't know that Anscombe would have accepted the charge that, on her position, the spatiality of the human body is something given from outside of our thought. (Obviously she did not think it is given from outside Thought itself.) More importantly, it seems incorrect to read her essay as saying that the spatiality of the human body is what explains how there can be a multiplicity of thinkers. For the source of the problem is supposed to be more fundamental: Anscombe says that even if we were to grant, *arguendo*, that there are multiple distinct intellects (either individuated materially, as in man, or specifically, as Thomas Aquinas thought of the angels), the question would remain how such intellects could have any understanding of what is general:

> Each particular … distinct one will be incapable of understanding because understanding is of things that are general and not of particulars. The argument would lead to the impossibility of there being more than one intellect at all, *i.e.* the impossibility of any except, say, *my* intellect if I want to take the solipsistic path; or, if I wish rather to be Spinozistic in spirit, any except the divine intellect. (Anscombe 2005, p. 25; emphasis in original)

I can do no better than Anscombe's conclusion at this point: 'The problem to be solved is a general one' (ibid.). But I cannot really see how it is less of a problem for Rödl's position than for hers.

A note of conclusion: it's a sign of the depth and richness of Sebastian Rödl's work that it makes one go back and think through the most fundamental things—through questions that, in the case of this reviewer, had once come up in the course of undergraduate education and then been assigned to the annals of history. Here, as at many other points, it is difficult to get oneself around to comprehending, let alone thinking straight, that which according to Rödl is 'only what anyone always already knows, knows in any judgment, knows insofar as she judges at all' (Rödl 2018, p. 13). But a great deal is gained by trying.*

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