

## Book Review

*Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*, by Sebastian Rödl. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018, Pp. 198.

In his recent book, *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism*, Sebastian Rödl aims to transform our understanding, not only of the relation between self-consciousness and objectivity, but of the nature of judgment, knowledge, science, and even logic itself. By ‘our understanding’ I mean views that are very widespread in analytic philosophy, but which Rödl takes to be deeply confused, indeed, to fail even to express thoughts. Perhaps, then, it would be better to say that Rödl aims to transform misunderstanding or pseudo-understanding of these topics into genuine understanding. As you can see, this is a very ambitious book. In this critical discussion I will raise some questions about whether its execution is equal to those ambitions.

I will focus most of my attention on Rödl’s most striking claims in the first part of the book, roughly Chapters One through Five. There is a great deal of fascinating material in the second half, with which I am in greater sympathy, but, like a typical philosopher, I will focus on these early chapters because I disagree with them. In §2 I distinguish Rödl’s core claims and their logical relation. I focus on one claim in particular – that the judgment that  $p$  is the same as the judgment *I think that  $p$* —and raise some worries about it. In §3 I critically examine what I take to be the strongest reasons Rödl gives in support of this claim. However, Rödl does not understand himself to be offering ‘claims’ that might be disagreed with, much less to be giving arguments that support these claims. I thus expect him to be unimpressed with my animadversions about what I call his ‘arguments’. Consequently, I begin with a discussion of his method, in §1.

### 1. The method: no claims, no arguments

Usually, a critical discussion of a book involves explaining to the reader the author’s core theses and her arguments for them. But it is not clear I can proceed this way, for Rödl is adamant that what I will neutrally call his ‘elucidations’ of the nature of judgment are not themselves ‘judgments

with contraries', about which we might meaningfully disagree (that is, judgments that  $p$ , to which I might reply that  $\sim p$ ). As he writes: 'Now there are people who are prepared to say that it is one thing to judge and another thing to think it valid so to judge. They will use these words. This does not mean that they reject what I say. It does not mean that there is such a thing as rejecting what I say. If what I say is true, then they only seem to say something, while their words, used in the manner in which they intend to use them, bear no meaning' (Rödl 2018, p. 41). There is no 'contrary' to his elucidations because they are contained in every self-consciousness, and thus, as we shall see, in every judgment. So there is no such thing as disagreeing with Rödl, countering his  $p$  with your  $\sim p$ , but, by the same token, there is no such thing as agreeing with him either, no assenting to his judgment that  $p$  rather than  $\sim p$ . Rödl is not making judgments about a particular subject matter, but expressing the self-consciousness contained in any judgment.

Likewise, there can be no such thing as arguing for what Rödl says, no assembling of grounds that together entail or support  $p$ :

This explains what may appear a curious character of the present essay: it propounds no theses, advances no hypotheses, does not recommend a view or position; it does not give arguments that are to support a view, it does not defend a position against competing ones, it does nothing to rule out contrary theses. It does nothing of the sort because it is—it brings to explicit consciousness—the self-consciousness of judgment. As it aims to express the comprehension of judgment that is contained in any judgment, the present essay can say only what anyone always already knows, knows in any judgment, knows insofar as she judges at all. It cannot say anything that is novel, it can make no discovery, it cannot advance our knowledge in the least. (Rödl 2018, pp. 12–13).

The 'work' of this book is the articulation of the consciousness contained in any judgment, not an argument for a particular judgment or judgments. We always already know what Rödl elucidates; our implicit knowledge of what Rödl makes explicit is contained in any judgment we might make.

But even if Rödl's 'elucidations' are not judgments, and thus have no contraries and cannot be argued for or against, he can still give us reasons to reject putative contrary views as misguided. Rödl can uncover why what appear to be accounts of self-consciousness and judgment, what appear to be judgments and theories that can be argued for or against, are nothing of the sort, but mere illusions of sense that impede a clear understanding of what judgment is. He can explode them from within, so to speak. But that also means that we, as readers, can evaluate whether Rödl is successful in exploding these putative theories from the inside, in showing them to be nonsense. We can do so by temporarily taking these other putative 'views' to be judgments with contraries. If Rödl is right, then what we will discover is not that these other 'views' are merely implausible, or problematical, but that they do not even express thoughts. But this means we can evaluate whether Rödl has

given us sufficient reasons to think that these putative judgments are really just nonsense masquerading as sense. And that is what I shall do.

## 2. The core claims: force-content, validity, self-consciousness

In the first half of the book Rödl makes three interrelated claims, which are not always clearly separated. There are others, but these are the main ones, if I am reading him correctly:

- (i) *There is no force-content distinction.* Frege was wrong to think that judgment involves a distinction between a content and a force, where the same content ( $p$ ) can be represented with different forces (for example, I can wonder whether  $p$ , assert that  $p$ , and so on). Rödl tends to focus on Frege's particular version of the distinction, but his considered view seems to be that there is no such coherent distinction at all.
- (ii) *A judgment is the thought of its own validity.* Rödl says various things of this sort. In some contexts, they seem to mean (iii) below. In some others, they seem to mean something much less radical: the predicate 'is true' does not add anything to a judgment, so  $p$  is true and  $p$  are the same judgment.
- (iii) *The judgment  $p$  and the judgment I judge that  $p$  are the same judgment.* This is the claim I will focus on; I explain it in more detail below.

First of all, these three claims are *prima facie* logically independent, and Rödl offers little reason to think they are not. The independence of (i) from (ii) is suggested, for one thing, by the fact that Frege held (ii) but upheld the force-content distinction. (See Frege 1997, p. 297.) But Frege could have been inconsistent, so let us examine the matter ourselves. It seems that I can admit that  $p$  has the same content as *it is true that  $p$* , as per (ii), while thinking there is a difference between entertaining that content (that is, wondering whether  $p$ /whether  $p$  is true) and asserting it (that is, asserting that  $p$ /that  $p$  is true), contra (i). What is more, conversely, the denial of (ii) is *prima facie* consistent with (i). It seems consistent to hold that the truth-predicate alters the content of a judgment (perhaps because truth is the property of correspondence to a fact), while also distinguishing force from content; one would simply have to distinguish between asserting that  $p$  and asserting that  $p$  is true (likewise, between wondering whether  $p$  and wondering whether  $p$  is true). This may not be a consistent position, but it is unclear to me what reason Rödl gives us to think it is not.

More importantly, both (i) and (ii) are *prima facie* independent of (iii). There is no obvious path from (i), the denial of the force-content distinction,

to (iii) and, from what I can tell, Rödl does not provide one. The denial of the force-content distinction is hardly unknown in post-Fregean analytic philosophy, but none of the philosophers who have denied it (for example, Scott Soames and Peter Hanks) have endorsed (iii), for reasons that will emerge shortly. But, conversely, even if I identify  $p$  and  $I$  judge that  $p$ , this does not seem to require abandoning the force-content distinction, for that content ( $I$  judge that  $p$ ) can still be represented with different forces: I can wonder whether it is the case (wonder whether  $p$ /whether  $I$  judge that  $p$ ), I can assert it (assert that  $p$ /that  $I$  judge that  $p$ ), and so on. Finally, (iii) is logically independent of (ii). Claim (ii) is essentially a minimalist view about truth; it says nothing about self-consciousness. It seems I could consistently hold (ii) while claiming that judgment is not as such self-conscious, that it is possible to judge that  $p$  without being so much as conscious that one is judging that  $p$  (hence that the judgment that  $p$  cannot be the self-consciousness of oneself as judging that  $p$ ).

Since (i) and (ii) are familiar enough doctrines, let us focus on (iii), the really radical claim here (unless we all already know it to be the case). I will devote the rest of this section to explaining what it means and raising some problems for it; in the next section I examine Rödl's argument for it (with the qualifications on 'argument' noted in the previous section).

Rödl takes judgment as such to be self-conscious. This means that anyone who judges that  $p$  is conscious that they judge that  $p$ . There is no judging that  $p$  without the self-consciousness that  $I$  judge that  $p$ . As far as I can tell, no reason is given for this claim. Consequently, I will simply take it to constitute a delimitation of the subject matter: judgment by self-conscious subjects, subjects who are always conscious that they are judging what they are judging.

Rödl now asks, why is judgment as such self-conscious? Why in judging that  $p$  am I always conscious that I judge that  $p$ ? One might be inclined to begin by saying: this is a fact about what it is to judge, not a fact about what is judged. Thus one might separate the consciousness of the content of judgment ( $p$ ) from the consciousness of one's own act of judgment, while claiming that both are contained in the consciousness of a judging subject. One might then say, for instance, that it is just what conscious judging is, that, in judging, one is conscious both of *what* one judges and *that* one judges.

Rödl disagrees. He claims that you cannot coherently distinguish between what is judged ( $p$ ) and the consciousness of so judging it ( $I$  judge that  $p$ ). According to Rödl these are one and the same judgment. In general, in judging  $p$  I judge the very same thing I judge when I judge  $I$  judge that  $p$ .

This is a startling thesis. Before we consider Rödl's arguments, it is worth pausing to consider some immediate problems for such a view. They will give us a good sense of how strong Rödl's arguments would have to be to convince us of this, that is, how strong the reasons would have to be to convince us the alternative is incoherent, not even thinkable.

*Possibility of error.* I judge that: it is possible that there is some  $p$  such that I judge that  $p$ , although  $\sim p$ . But if the judgment that  $p$  and the judgment *I judge that  $p$*  are the same, this is equivalent to judging that: it is possible that there is some  $p$  such that  $p$ , although  $\sim p$ . A sober recommendation of epistemic modesty appears to entail a contradiction.

*Scope and logical connectives.* Rödl never clarifies what scope the ‘I judge’ should take with respect to logical connectives. For instance, is the judgment that  $\sim p$  equivalent to  $\sim$ (I judge that  $p$ ) or to *I judge that  $\sim p$* ? I think Rödl will want to say it is the latter, for only on the latter is the content of judgment entirely within the scope of the ‘I judge’. But then the tautology  $p$  or  $\sim p$  would be equivalent to *I judge that  $p$*  or *I judge that  $\sim p$* , which would exclude the possibility of suspending judgment, or at least of judging that one suspends judgment, as to whether  $p$ . But if  $\sim p$  is instead equivalent to  $\sim$ (I judge that  $p$ ) then there is no difference between simply failing to judge that  $p$  and judging that  $\sim p$ . In  $\sim$ (I judge that  $p$ ) &  $\sim$ (I judge that  $\sim p$ ), the natural expression of suspension of judgment, the first conjunct is equivalent to  $\sim p$ . Suspension of judgment, again, proves to be impossible.

I suspect the more likely reply by Rödl would be that in my first argument I assumed the identity of  $p$  and *I judge that  $p$*  where  $p$  is not the whole judgment, but a constituent of what I judge. That is, in *I judge that  $p$*  or *I judge that  $\sim p$*  I assumed the first conjunct to be equivalent to  $p$  by application of Rödl’s principle (iii). He might reply that this equivalence is meant only to hold for *whole* judgments, not their constituents. So if I judge that  $p$ , then what I judge is equivalent to *I judge that  $p$* ; but if I judge *if  $p$  then  $q$* , the antecedent is not equivalent to *I judge that  $p$* . But this will not sit well with the rest of Rödl’s view, for it threatens to reintroduce the force-content distinction through the backdoor (or the front?). For now  $p$  can appear unasserted as a constituent of a conditional assertion, where it is not equivalent to *I judge that  $p$* ; or it can appear as the whole assertion, in which case it is equivalent to *I judge that  $p$* . It should be noted that this kind of difference between occurrences of  $p$  is one of the main reasons Frege introduced the force-content distinction in the first place.

Rödl might also reply that to suspend judgment is to do precisely that: not to judge at all. So my argument goes wrong at the first step by assuming that *I judge that  $p$*  or *I judge that  $\sim p$*  is a judgment. While I can suspend judgment by failing to judge, surely I can also explicitly judge *that* I judge neither that  $p$  nor that  $\sim p$ . Rödl might retreat to denying that suspension of judgment is possible at all, that I (or ‘the I’) has always already judged on every matter. But then I lose my grip on what phenomenon we are talking about; the book begins by discussing quite ordinary cases of first-personal judgment. If I am conscious of one thing about judgment, it is that I do not judge *either* that the case fatality rate of COVID-19 is greater than .4%, *or* that it is less than or

equal to .4%. I suspend judgment. No judgment of this is contained in *my* consciousness, at least.

### 3. The core arguments

The previous section gives, I hope, a sense of the stakes involved here. If Rödl is right, it will require a deep reorientation in how we (or, at least, many of us) think about judgment and negation. Conversely, if he is right, many of us are deeply committed to the purest nonsense. Although, as we have seen, Rödl abjures arguments, his statements of the core claim, and his rejection of alternative views of the self-consciousness of judgment, are accompanied at various points by adverbs of consequence: ‘thus’, ‘therefore’, and so on. I will therefore assume that these passages are intended to offer reasons for rejecting alternative explanations as confused or misguided, and thus as reasons for saying what Rödl says. In this section I explore what I take to be Rödl’s arguments for this core claim. For reasons of space, I will focus on what I take to be his best arguments and keep my critical comments brief.

*The direct arguments.* Rödl does give several direct arguments for (iii). They include the following:

[a] [A]s the validity of a judgment depends alone on what it judges, there can be nothing of which one need be conscious in addition to what one judges in order to recognize judging it to be valid; being conscious of what is judged suffices for being conscious of the validity of judging it. Since any given character of the subject of judgment [a character of a judging subject such that in order to understand her to possess it, it does not suffice to share in her judgment] is excluded from the measure of validity of her judgment, nothing over and above the thought of what is judged—and that is, nothing over and above the judgment itself—is required for the thought of the validity of judging it. A judgment, being objective, is itself the thought of its validity. (Rödl 2018, pp. 11–12)

Rödl presents this as a reason to think the objectivity of judgment requires its self-consciousness. But it establishes at most (ii)—that judging that *p* is judging that *p* is true, or that it would be correct to judge that *p*—not (iii).

[b] Suppose John thinks what he would express by saying *I think p*. There are two elements: a proposition, *I think p*, and John’s attitude toward it: John affirms *I think p*. As the proposition is distinct from the act of affirming it, its truth-value does not depend on anyone’s affirming it; a fortiori, it does not depend on John’s affirming it. [...] However, as thinking something is understanding oneself to think it, John thinks *p* if and only if he thinks that he himself thinks *p*. ‘He himself’, here, is the first person pronoun in *oratio obliqua*: John thinks *p* if and only if he thinks what he would express by saying ‘I think *p*’. The truth of the proposition John affirms, affirming *I think p*, depends on, indeed, depends on nothing but, his affirming it. Which is to say that there is no such proposition. (Rödl 2018, p. 20)

But the truth of the proposition John affirms in affirming *I think p* depends on his thinking *it* (*I think p*) only if this proposition is identical to his thinking of it, that is, if the proposition *I think p* is equivalent to the proposition *I think I think p*. But no reason has been given for this, except the general claim that *p* is equivalent to *I think p*. So either the argument is invalid, or it is circular.

[c] I gather, though, what really drives Rödl to embrace (iii) is the problem of accounting for the essential self-consciousness of judgment if *p* and *I judge that p* are distinct judgments, in particular, the problem of accounting for (what I agreed above to take to be) the fact that anyone who judges the former is conscious of (and in a position to judge) the latter. In the course of undermining the idea that judging *p* involves consciousness both of *p* and *I judge that p*, he gestures at several ways that these consciousnesses might be distinguished (for example, that the former is ‘positional’ while the latter is not, the former is in the ‘foreground’ while the latter is in the background) and concludes:

However, as we distinguish these ways of being conscious of something, we have fixed it that there are two acts of consciousness, each with its own object. Thus we have lost the insight that judgment is self-conscious. We can go on, working ourselves into a still deeper morass, and declare that these two consciousnesses are inseparably bound one to the other, by metaphysical necessity, as we might venture saying. But now we must ask how we know of this metaphysical necessity, and whether our knowledge of it is a separate act of the mind from the judgment in question, and how, if it is not, it can be that we think of this judgment in the first person: *I judge p*. Let us leave it here. (Rödl 2018, pp. 21–22)

What if we didn’t leave it there? What if we said this: that judging that *p* is always part of a larger consciousness, a consciousness that includes consciousness of *I judge that p*, so that *p* and *I judge that p* are not really ‘distinct’ existences, but dependent parts of one more comprehensive consciousness. In judging that *p* I am also conscious that I judge that *p* because that consciousness is contained in the very same consciousness that contains my consciousness of *p*. Rödl’s book is replete with such descriptions of one consciousness being contained in another. Why can’t the self-consciousness of judgment be accounted for by *p* and *I judge that p* being contained in the same consciousness, rather than being the very same consciousness?

*The indirect arguments.* Another way Rödl makes the case for his view—or dispels confusions standing in the way of what we all already know, according to his self-description—is by pointing out problems other views face in accounting for the first-person. A prominent example of such a view that Rödl directly confronts is Frege’s view of the sense of the first-person pronoun ‘I’. To use Frege’s famous example from ‘*Der Gedanke*’: Dr Lauben

thinks a different thought when he thinks ‘I was wounded’ than he does when he thinks ‘Dr Lauben was wounded’. For one thing, Dr Lauben can rationally believe the former, without believing the latter (for instance, if he has amnesia and has forgotten that he is Dr Lauben). This leads Frege to the view that ‘everyone is presented to himself in a special and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else’ (Frege 1979, p. 333) and this ‘private’ mode of presentation, of oneself to oneself, is the sense of the first-person pronoun in thoughts like ‘I am Dr Lauben’ (or ‘I judge that *p*’, though Frege, at least in this text, does not explicitly discuss self-ascriptions of judgment).

Here is Rödl contra Frege:

How does Bob recognize that a thought that is such that there is no such thing as his thinking it [*for example, ‘I am wounded’, as thought by Dr Lauben*] is equivalent to a thought that he does think [*‘Dr Lauben is wounded’*]? How does he so much as frame the idea of such a thought? Fregean accounts of first-person thought—accounts that postulate Fregean senses for such thoughts deploy signs that are to signify the first-person concept of someone other than her who uses the sign. In effect, such a sign quotes the first-person pronoun: the proposition John thinks, thinking *SELF has mud on face*, is the proposition John thinks, thinking what he would express by saying, ‘I have mud on my face’. What enables us—what enables Bob—to understand this sign? Indeed, what enables us to apprehend it as a sign? On the Fregean account, we cannot approach the thought we quote any closer than we do in referring to its sign. There is no such thing as disquoting this quote. And we must not say: yes there is, for she who thinks the first-person thought can disquote. For we apprehend her disquoting only in quotes. And our question is what we can make of these quotes. The Neo-Fregean ‘I’, or SELF, or {*s*}, is the undisquotable quote, the uninterpretable sign, the enigma itself. (Rödl 2018, pp. 24–25)

I confess I am not sure what the argument here is. First of all, there is such a thing as ‘disquoting this quote’: the thought expressed by ‘I am wounded’ as uttered by Dr Lauben is true if and only if Dr Lauben is wounded. We apprehend ‘I’ in the mouth of Dr Lauben as a sign because it stands in the same relation to a sense as other expressions do: it expresses a sense. It is merely that this sense (the mode of presentation in which Dr Lauben is given to himself) is a sense that no expression in our language can express, though there is an expression in our language that designates (*bedeutet*) that sense, the expression ‘the sense of “I” as uttered by Dr Lauben’.

But even if Rödl is right that Frege’s account of essentially private first-person thoughts is incoherent, this cannot entail that ‘I judge that *p*’ is equivalent to *p* because the problem that Frege is concerned with (first-person thought) is more general than first-person ascriptions of judgment. As Frege’s original example shows, it applies even in cases where the verb is not a verb of attitude (for example, ‘I was wounded’). Frege’s puzzle, that Dr Lauben believes something different when he believes ‘I was wounded’ and when he believes ‘Dr Lauben was wounded’, is not dissolved or



dismissed by saying that the *I think* ‘infuses’ *p*, is ‘contained in’ *p*, and so on, because even if we follow Rödl down that path, we still need to account for the *prima facie* difference between Dr Lauben’s judging *I was wounded* (= *I judge that I was wounded*) and *Dr Lauben was wounded* (= *I judge that Dr Lauben was wounded*). Identifying *I think that p* with *p* is no help in addressing this issue, because ‘I think’ either does not appear in the problematic judgment (‘I am wounded’) or, insofar as it does, it appears in every judgment, including those that pose no such problem (for example, ‘Dr Lauben is wounded’). Rödl, in other words, has not shown us how to solve Frege’s original puzzle. In particular, he has not shown that it is to be solved by identifying *p* and *I judge that p*.\*

### References

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