

Knowing Subjectivity

Jacques Maritain & John Crosby

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Commonsense can be hard to come by. Consider, for example, the vexed question of self-knowledge.

In Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, Razumihin urges us to "talk nonsense, but talk your own nonsense," and we applaud. How can we suffer another to speak for us, when we alone know ourselves? But what about Bobby Burns's plea (in "To a Louse") "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us to see oursels as others see us?" Why, once again we applaud—and just as heartily. For how can we hope to see, and thus to know, ourselves aright when others manifestly cannot see themselves as they are?

Enter Dame Philosophy. Socrates, her liege, enjoins us: "Know thyself." But what are we to make of his injunction? After all, it might seem, *either* we, and we alone, already know ourselves *or*, alternatively, we cannot even hope to know ourselves—not as we really are. How, then, can we follow such counsel? Can philosophy, Fair Mistress that she is, ease our puzzlement? However mixed her past ministrations, let's explore the prospects at hand.

The quest for self-knowledge is vexing, in part, because its proper object is as elusive as it is intriguing. Suppose, for a start, that we understand the *self* of self-knowledge as subjectivity. Fair enough. But what's this subjectivity? With John Crosby, we can profitably understand subjectivity as "self-presence."¹ Note: if we make this start, we can't, without elaboration, simultaneously understand *self* as substance or, as Jacques Maritain sometimes has in mind, "the substantial totality" of the person.²

Suppose, too, that we understand knowledge, broadly construed, as grasping the existence of what one knows—as object—in what Maritain calls its "particular field of intelligibility."³ One last clarification is in order: only

¹ John Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 94.

² Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian, 1974), p. 82.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Pantheon, 1948), p. 11.

subjects can know, and they do so by forming an immaterial, and objective, notion of this or that existent. Knowledge, so construed, calls to mind the adage “*anima est quodammodo omnia.*”

Now, then, the question at issue: can we have self-knowledge in the sense of knowing our own subjectivity?

Herein lies the dispute between Maritain and Crosby. It is instructive, and Crosby—a phenomenological personalist—has recently drawn our attention to it. We cannot, says Maritain, have philosophical knowledge of our own subjectivity, because philosophy knows subjects only as objects. But we cannot form an objective notion of, we cannot objectify, our own subjectivity. To suppose otherwise distorts the nature of subjectivity. In addition, one might infer, though Maritain does not, that if to know the other is, in a way, to become the other, then self-knowledge implies an act by which I come to be myself. But I already *am* myself.

Nonetheless Crosby contests Maritain’s analysis. Crosby holds that we can rightly “affirm...the subjectivity of self-presence” even when “objectivized...in philosophical reflection.”⁴ To suppose otherwise overlooks the obvious: we do philosophize about subjectivity—without reducing it to, or mistaking it for, an objectifying consciousness. Maritain’s own practice demonstrates as much. And, of course, we are already ourselves; but this doesn’t keep us from gaining knowledge about ourselves, indeed, of our own subjectivity. Such knowledge, it’s fair to say, enriches our ways of being.⁵

Another dispute between philosophers, about something so basic as self-knowledge, might seem to be of little help to commonsense. And when the dispute is both plausible and persistent, we’re in no position to scold the skeptics. On the other hand, if we can negotiate this dispute, we might be able to silence them. We might even be able to minister to commonsense. As it happens, the prospects for both are promising, or so I will argue. An initial point: if we look closely at key texts, we find that Maritain and Crosby qualify (and complicate) their positions. Given this maneuvering, we can make headway in overcoming their impasse by a careful framing of their remarks.

Maritain: A Closer Look

Granted, the core of Maritain’s position seems uncompromising. “Subjectivity as *subjectivity* is inconceptualisable,” he insists.⁶ But for every core

⁴ *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, p. 96.

⁵ For an acute analysis of this see point, see Yves R. Simon, *Philosopher at Work*, ed., Anthony O. Simon (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 183.

⁶ *Existence and the Existent*, p. 69.

there's a context. To fill in the context of his position, we can turn to a pair of equally striking, and related, claims that he affirms.

First, Maritain agrees with the sober thesis that we never know everything about anything. But why not? Because each subject is "an inexhaustible well of knowability."⁷ We know subjects only as objects and, thus, only in certain of their "intelligible aspects," or rather "*inspects...*"⁸ Epistemically, we've always only just begun. But doesn't this sobriety encourage a fresh question? If knowledge of existing subjects is always limited, precisely because they are subjects, why can't there be knowledge, albeit limited, of one's own subjectivity as well? Yes, such knowing involves conceptualizing, and it takes a subject as its object. But it does not, cannot, exhaust the reality of the subject. Neither need it diminish the subjectivity of the knower.

Second, Maritain distinguishes between the self-knowledge of "psychological" analysis and a richer "ontological" self-knowledge.⁹ The former introduces us to the ego, not the self. The latter, however, is revelatory; its vehicle is a metaphysical generosity. Maritain relishes the achieving of an ontological self-knowledge in self-donation. But this same dynamic, it seems, could open the way for a philosophical knowledge of self-presence. Given this dynamic, mightn't one also grasp—conceptually—one's self-presence? In self-bestowal, it seems, one can grasp the presence of one's self even as one informs one's character. To be sure, Maritain distinguishes between intellect and will. He writes that "as substantial totality,"

Subjectivity both receives and gives. It receives through the intellect, by superexisting in knowledge. It gives through the will, by superexisting in love; that is, by having within itself other beings as inner attractions directed towards them and giving oneself to them, and by spiritually existing in the manner of a gift.¹⁰

Yet intellect and will, however we distinguish them, are powers of the integrated human person. It is I who know, I who will.

Again, Maritain's own analysis raises the fresh question. Why can't we have conceptual knowledge of our ontological self-knowledge? Why can't we have a philosophical knowledge of the subjectivity that becomes open to us (yet inexhaustible) in authentic acts of self-donation? We can know, for example, that such a subjectivity is expressive of both intellect and will. Taken together, our fresh questions suggest that Maritain's epistemology might be

⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁰ Ibid.

more capacious than some suppose. Perhaps it does allow for a distinctive self-knowledge of the subjectivity of self-presence. The context of this knowledge must be rightly framed. Nonetheless, while sharply limited, it is indeed knowledge; it is a conceptual grasp of self-presence in the act of self-donation. Because, for Maritain, all our objectifying (and thus philosophical) knowledge is of subjects as they present themselves, the grasping of one's self-presence reflects his affirmation of "the basic generosity of existence."¹¹

Crosby: Another Closer Look

The core of Crosby's position on knowing one's subjectivity looks as uncompromising as Maritain's. We can, he insists, "put subjectivity in front of us an object, yet understand it precisely as subjectivity."¹² But this core, too, has its context. To fill in this context, we can turn to a sampler of striking—and, again, related—claims that Crosby advances.

There is, first, a temporal qualification. He admits that perhaps "elements [of my subjectivity] are unavailable to me...*as long as* I have the experience, but not *before or after* having the experience."¹³ This qualification doesn't make all of one's subjectivity inaccessible. But the limits are worth noting. He reminds us how quickly awkward introspection can spoil the fleeting moment. But his qualification does raise its own fresh question. For when one reflects on the subjectivity of the past, even one's immediate past, isn't one reflecting—to be exact—in the manner of memory? But knowing in the manner of memory, while often conceptual, is not the same as knowing through the contemporaneous grasp of self-presence.

Second, Crosby sometimes shifts from speaking of the knowledge of subjectivity, as an experience, to knowledge of "subjectivity in principle."¹⁴ Fair enough, but doing so leads to another question. Isn't there a difference, on the one hand, between philosophical knowledge of the structure of subjectivity (what subjectivity "essentially" is) and, on the other hand, and understanding it from the inside of one's experience?¹⁵ Even a systematic knowledge of structure might prove less elusive than an episodic, but conceptual, insight into the immediacy of self-presence. In any case, Maritain, for his part, insists that subjectivity has an "intelligible structure."¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, p. 96.

¹³ Ibid. p. 97.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Existence and the Existent*, p. 81.

Taken together, these new questions suggest that Crosby's account of self-knowledge is, after all, perhaps not so very different from Maritain's. For Crosby, we can know the structure of subjectivity as self-presence. Yet a conceptual grasp of the immediate phenomenon of self-presence is limited. It must be so, because the immediacy of subjectivity is partly opaque. It must be so, as well, for another reason. The selfhood of the person, as the full subjectivity of the person, is incommunicable—that is, it is proper to itself alone. (Nor would Maritain say otherwise.) As incommunicable, moreover, one's subjectivity is conceptually inexhaustible. This incommunicability at once restricts the range of one's knowledge of one's self-presence and points to the mystery of the human person.

Compatibilism and a Pair of Analogies

Despite their official dispute about the knowledge of subjectivity, I propose, then, that Maritain and Crosby share a deeper compatibility with respect to self-knowledge. Let's turn now to a pair of analogies that further support a compatibilist reading.

Consider, first, an analogy between love and knowledge. We can begin with the love of the *other*. As it happens, we can borrow a text here from John Crosby. In discussing Maritain's view of conscience, he reminds us of Montaigne's engaging reply to the question of why he loved so-and-so. "If I am entreated to say why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed except by answering 'Because it was he, because it was I.'"¹⁷ For Montaigne, love is not reductive: its object is simultaneously a subject, and uniquely so.

On this point, Montaigne finds no argument from Maritain. As Crosby knows, Maritain equally insists on the uniqueness of the beloved. In *The Person and the Common Good* he writes:

Love is not concerned with qualities. They are not the object of our love. We love the deepest most substantial and hidden, the most *existing* reality of the beloved being. This is a metaphysical center deeper than all the qualities and essences which we can find and enumerate in the beloved.¹⁸

Such a love, Maritain tells us, is inexhaustible; the beloved transcends any inventory. Yet our love brings us a distinctive knowledge of the other. It is,

¹⁷ *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, p. 77.

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 39.

moreover, one that we can, in part, conceptualize. To the extent that we can, it is philosophical.

But consider, now, the love of self. It, too, directs one to a “most *existing* reality.” In light of this trajectory, one achieves a distinctive knowledge of one’s self. Again, it is one which we can, in part, conceptualize. To the extent that we can, it is philosophical. Herein we can make a fresh inference: if self-love is possible, and it is, then analogously self-knowledge is possible. Note, too, a critical interchange. Self-love both draws on, and gives rise to, a species of self-knowledge.

There is, as well, a second analogy to explore. Consider the analogy between moral self-examination, as the discerning of one’s conscience, and self-knowledge, as the knowing of one’s subjectivity. Crosby readily affirms universal moral norms. They are indicative of, and keyed to, our shared human nature. This nature of ours is communicable in the sense that we share it. Yet each of us has, beyond a share in human nature, an *incommunicable* self and a unique self-presence. Moral scrutiny requires an awareness of one’s subjectivity in relation to value and duty. But we can, in part, conceptualize this relationship, even with its subjective pole. This discernment is a moral knowing. In achieving it, we deepen a self-understanding that extends to our subjectivity.

Again, as Crosby appreciates, Maritain insists on a comparable point. We see this in his account of discerning one’s most far-reaching moral options. In this discernment, Maritain writes, we meet an “inscrutable” and disconcerting subjectivity. “How can it be otherwise, if it is true that the judgment of the subject’s conscience is obliged, at the moment when judgment is freely made, to take account also of the whole of the unknown reality within him...?”¹⁹ Even so, we must press on. This discernment is more than possible; it is an imperative. But it could be neither if it required us to apply moral norms to an altogether unknowable subjectivity. While our subjectivity encloses much that is unknown, we can have some cognitive access to that subjectivity. At the same time, we cannot fully articulate the process of discernment. We cannot exhaust the subjectivity of the self who responds to objective moral norms.

Our second analogy, then, suggests the following. If moral discernment is possible, and it is, we can enjoy—as a form of self-knowledge—a real, if limited, access to our own subjectivity. It is a knowledge that admits, too, of some conceptual articulation. As such, it is philosophical. Note, too, another critical interchange. Moral discernment both draws on, and gives rise to, a species of self-knowledge.

¹⁹ *Existence and the Existent*, pp. 53-54.

But there's also a further connection. Self-knowledge is necessary for moral discernment. But moral discernment, with regard to one's own actions or another's, is impoverished without love of self and love of the other. Experience, too, underscores the reciprocity between love of self and love of the other. Without love for self, how can I love another? And if I hold others in contempt, won't I come to feel contempt for self? A reciprocal love of self and others, by contrast, constitutes the horizon of moral discernment and the horizon of the knowledge of persons *as subjects* with their own self-presence.

Maritain himself identifies love's role in the knowledge of subjectivity, whether one's own or that of the other. He writes

To the degree that we truly love...we acquire an obscure knowledge of the being we love, similar to that which we possess of ourselves; we know that being in his very subjectivity (at least in a certain measure) by this experience of union.²⁰

In affirming this dynamism, Maritain reiterates a qualification. The knowledge of subjectivity remains "obscure." Granted. But such obscurity as this, the poets show us, can be eloquent. Why cannot it be philosophical as well?

In any case, Maritain points to an ethical corollary that follows from even the knowledge of an obscure subjectivity. Only insofar as I grasp my subjectivity, he argues, can I judge my actions. For what my actions are depends, in part, on the subjectivity which I express through them. Equally, only insofar as I grasp the subjectivity of another can I judge another's actions. For what the actions of another are depend, in part, on the subjectivity which another expresses through them.

This ethical corollary suggests a theological corollary. Because we know both our own subjectivity and our neighbor's only in part, God alone is a just judge. "The more I know of my subjectivity," Maritain observes, "the more it remains obscure to me. If I were not known to God, no one would know me."²¹ Yet nothing in this confession gainsays that I can have some knowledge of my subjectivity. I am enjoined, for example, to discern the beam in my own eye. After this discernment St. Augustine, no stranger to evil times, notes that there may be cause to look to my neighbor. Although Augustine agrees that subjective intention can be elusive, he recalls the Apostle's words in First Timothy 5:24, "The sins of some people are conspicuous and precede them to judgment...." In such cases, Augustine comments, "if judgment fol-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

²¹ Ibid., p. 77.

lows them at once, it will not be rash,” though our reproof should never make a change of heart more difficult.”²²

Skeptical Challenges

But perhaps my compatibilist analysis comes too easily. A skeptic might ask why one would even try to reconcile Maritain and Crosby. Hasn't Hume, among others, collapsed the ground on which they invite us to stand? And why reckon the prospects of knowing one's subjectivity if there is no self and, hence, no self-presence it manifests? The psychologist, too, if he is William James, seconds such complaints. Why try to parse our grasp of such a self-presence, if only a naïve commonsense misleads us into believing that a unitary self exists?

Recall Hume on knowing the self. “All ideas are borrow'd from preceding perceptions,” he writes, so “[w]hen I turn my reflexion on *myself*, I never can perceive this *self* without one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. 'Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self.”²³ But if there is no unitary self, no substantial self, an inquiry into its self-presence is futile. There's only this perception (or that) to identify, this (or that) bundle of perceptions to inventory.

James, too, dismisses the “hypothesis” of a unified self. Surveying his own consciousness, he finds that his “*Self of selves*” consists “*mainly of...peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat,*” these “cephalic motions” being “the portions of...innermost activity” of which, he says, he is “*most distinctly aware.*”²⁴

David Hume and William James, of course, have their differences. But both would agree that Maritain and Crosby are trafficking in chimeras. Such philosophical self-knowledge is impossible, because neither a self nor a distinct presence of self to self exists. To their credit, however, both Hume and James admit that someone else *might* have an experience that affords a different testimony about the reality of the self and a distinctive self-presence. Such a testimony, we might suppose, could renew—and even accelerate—an inquiry into the knowledge of subjectivity.

But where are we to find this fresh testimony? Could you or I, for example, provide it? We might, I guess, take a quick break to “check out” our

²² Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, in *The Works of St. Augustine* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1951) Book II, Ch. 19, No. 60, p. 170.

²³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 634.

²⁴ William James, *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), Vol. 1, chap. 10, p. 288. Emphasis in the original.

experiences. But having tried such an experiment in the classroom, with scant success, I'll not attempt it here.

Yet neither will I settle for the reports of Hume and James. So I introduce, as counterbalance, quite another testimony. It comes from a keen observer of particularity. Gerard Manley Hopkins, poet of inscape, offers us the following reflection. Because his remarks are less familiar than Hume's or James', I cite them more fully. When Hopkins searches, he finds

my self being, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutlead or camphor, and is incommunicable by any means to another man (as when I was a child I used to ask myself: What must it be to be someone else?). Nothing else in nature comes near this unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own. Nothing explains it or resembles it, except so far as this, that other men to themselves have the same feeling. But this only multiplies the phenomena to be explained so far as the cases are like and do resemble. But to me there is no resemblance....I taste *self* but at one tankard, that of my own being.²⁵

Hopkins's "taste" of self is not of anything else; it is not, for example, the taste of any combination of tastes. Rather, it is the taste of his "selving." This "selving" I understand to be, or at least include, his self's presence to self. Neither does Hopkins experience anything marginal or ambiguous. What he experiences, he reports, is more distinctive than the taste of Guinness.

Suppose, we accept Hopkins's testimony on the taste of self and its selving. Suppose we credit his claim that there's nothing extraordinary in his having such an experience, only that the taste he encounters is extraordinary. What we experience, then, will be extraordinary, too—but in its own extraordinary way. If we grant such suppositions, we can return, with new insight, to the original dispute between Maritain and Crosby. A pair of questions at once arises. First, does Hopkins's contribution better the prospects for either disputant? Second, given his contribution, how stand the prospects for bridging their positions?

The first answer, I think, is that Hopkins betters the prospects for both disputants. The second answer is that in doing so he betters the chances for bridging their positions. On Maritain's side, we can only in part describe an experience so immediate as a taste. Hopkins's taste of "selving," moreover, scarcely exhausts the experience of self-presence, much less does it exhaust his very self. On Crosby's side, Hopkins does describe, if only in part, his

²⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 282.

experience of his own unique selving. He does so eloquently...and conceptually. We might add that he does so “in retrospect,” rather than by breaking into the immediacy of self-identification.

Yet if Hopkins’s testimony supports both Maritain and Crosby, it does so in a way that equally supports their deeper compatibility. Let me be more specific, and on two counts.

First, I noted an analogy between self-love and self-knowledge. Self-love calls for a personal agency that, in effect, both Hume and James disavow. But Hopkins, for his part, celebrates the self—more so than Whitman!—chiefly as a lover, a person who loves. Authentic self-love equally calls for the recognition of the selfhood of the beloved. Such recognition is impossible for Hume and James, if we take them on their word. In contrast, Maritain and Crosby insist, and this point is central for them, on the reality of personal agency. It is uniquely the source and worthy object of love.

Second, I noted a corollary that Maritain draws from the reciprocity of love of self and knowledge of self. It is an ethical corollary. We judge ourselves rightly only insofar as we know ourselves, and we can know ourselves only if we love ourselves. If the judging of ourselves is thus limited, *a fortiori* so is the judging of others. Now comes Hopkins’s testimony. It recognizes a distinctive human dignity in the experience of his “selving.” This experience of self-presence is decisive. If we honor it, we ground a self-knowledge that encourages a love of self. With this love, we become able to judge ourselves. But the experience of “selving” is a human experience. Hence, if we honor the parallel experience of others, we recognize their dignity; in this moral knowledge we can come to love them as they are. And with this love, we become able to judge them, as brothers and sisters. Hopkins’s support for Maritain’s corollary, to be sure, hardly counts against Crosby, since he would accept the same corollary. He holds that the “interpersonal” is integral to personal existence, especially in the awareness of self that we experience before the tribunal of conscience. He suggests, too, that the experience of the authority of conscience as absolute points us to the infinitely personal.²⁶

Envoi

The bridge between Maritain and Crosby, to my mind, is a sturdy one. But we cannot end our reflections without returning to the skeptics, whether notorious or otherwise. Nor can we forget the puzzlement of commonsense with which we began.

²⁶ *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, p. 213.

The skeptics cannot, I submit, match the insight of Hopkins. His inscape reproaches their reductionism. Still, from skeptics the most we can hope for is silence.

I would say more to the friends of commonsense, among whom I count myself. We should, indeed, talk our own nonsense. No one else can, and it's not without some measure of truth. But what, then, of the Scot's wish that "some Pow'r the giftie gie us to see oursel's as others see us?" It depends on how well they see us. If they do not love us, they do not see *us* very well—however expert they are in gauging our gaucherie.

Yet there is one who loves us, and loves us best. If we could see ourselves as God sees us, we would see the whole of ourselves and be wholly present to ourselves. In the beatific vision, St. Thomas teaches, we see ourselves as God sees us.²⁷ Then we will love in a way that we cannot now. Then we could judge, and forgive, in a way that we cannot now. In the vision of God, Maritain reflects, one "knows not only himself and all his life...but also the other creatures whom in God he knows at last as subjects in the unveiled depth of their being."²⁸ To be sure, such knowledge would be intuitive rather than conceptual.

Still, even now, we are to both forgive and repent. We can do neither without judging. Nor can we repent unless we judge our very selves. To do so, we must act on the self-knowledge we have—even when obscured and conceptual. Confessing our limits, we can yet know, right now, that we both need and have God's forgiveness²⁹

²⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, chap. 59, n. 6.

²⁸ *Existence and the Existent*, p. 80.

²⁹ With collegial grace, Carroll C. Kearley commented on an earlier draft of this essay.