

“BUT HOW IS SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS POSSIBLE?” HÖLDERLIN’S CRITICISM OF FICHTE IN “JUDGMENT AND BEING”

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At first glance it may be odd to turn to Friedrich Hölderlin in order to discuss problems of self-consciousness. Hölderlin, you may say, was a poet and not a philosopher. Of course, Hölderlin was a poet, but nevertheless he was very well acquainted with the philosophical problems of his days.¹ What is more he played an important role within the post-kantian philosophy, especially within the advanced discussions about self-consciousness – more precisely concerning the problem of defining the logical structure of the concept of self-consciousness and its role as a grounding principle of philosophy.

Our source is a text by Hölderlin which was edited by Friedrich Beißner in 1961. Beißner baptized it “Über Urteil und Seyn” – ‘On Judgment and Being’, following the keywords at the beginning of the two sections of the text.² In the following, I will not deal with the special historical circumstances of this text.³ I rather want to show its systematic importance with regard to the concept of self-consciousness, especially with regard to recent theories which understand self-consciousness in terms of self-representation.⁴ Here Hölderlin can be a systematically important interlocutor.

- 1 Cf. Dieter Henrich: *Der Grund im Bewusstsein. Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)*, Stuttgart 1992 and Violetta Waibel: *Hölderlin und Fichte. 1794–1804*, Paderborn u.a. 2000.
- 2 The text is to be found in *StA (Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe) IV*, pp. 216–217, see also J. Ch. F. Hölderlin: *Theoretische Schriften. Mit einer Einleitung herausgegeben von Johann Kreuzer*, Hamburg 1998, S. 7–8. A translation into English is to be found in Friedrich Hölderlin, “Über Urtheil und Seyn.” Trans. H. S. Harris, in H. S. Harris: *Hegel’s Development: Towards the Sunlight 1770–1801*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 515–516. Johann Kreuzer gives a detailed commentary of the philosophical content under the head of “Seyn, Urteil, Modalität (1795)” in *Hölderlin-Handbuch. Leben-Werk-Wirkung*, Stuttgart/Weimar 2002, pp. 228–232.
- 3 Cf. Dieter Henrich: *Hölderlin über Urteil und Sein. Eine Studie zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Idealismus*, in: Dieter Henrich: *Konstellationen. Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)*, Stuttgart 1991, pp. 46–63.
- 4 Cf. Manfred Frank: *Lässt sich Selbstbewusstsein als ‚Selbstrepräsentation‘ verstehen?*, in Manfred Frank: *Ansichten der Subjektivität*, Frankfurt a. M., 2012, pp. 369–397; Frank discusses theories of self-representationalism by Charles Siewert, Terry Horgan, Uriah Kriegel, Kenneth Williford u.a., cf. also Manfred Frank: *Präreflexives Selbstbewusstsein. Vier Vorlesungen*. Stuttgart 2015.

My first claim is that Hölderlin in discussing the logical structure of the concept of self-consciousness applies the conceptual framework of self-representationalism. My second claim is that Hölderlin at once criticizes the self-representationalistic view of self-consciousness. My third claim concerns the way Hölderlin proposes a new explanation of self-consciousness. This explanation entails two steps: The first step refers to a conceptual unity of – as he writes – subject and object which must be presupposed and which cannot be understood by terms of representation; Hölderlin calls it “Seyn” – “Being”. The second step in turn can be divided into two parts: the first part argues that the concept of self-consciousness depends logically on this unity; the second part holds that only due to this relationship a representational concept of self-consciousness is possible. Therefore we have two different claims of a theory of self-consciousness which stand in a necessary connection, first: self-consciousness can be conceptualized by means of self-representationalism; second: self-consciousness can be conceptualized by means of self-representationalism if and only if it is grounded by a non-representational unity called ‘being’. This sounds paradoxical and puzzling. But we should not run away and shut the door behind us. Instead I would like to show that Hölderlin’s proposal makes sense.⁵

I.

Let me start with the following quotation:

How can I say ‘I’ without self-consciousness? But how is self-consciousness possible? Precisely because I oppose myself to myself, but in spite of this sundering I recognize myself as the same in the opposite. But how far as the same? I can raise this question and I must; for in another respect it [the Ego] is opposed to itself.⁶

Obviously, the first question “How can I say ‘I’ without self-consciousness?” is a rhetorical question.⁷ It means that the term “I” refers to the mental state of

5 Cf. Jürgen Stolzenberg: Selbstbewusstsein. Ein Problem der Philosophie nach Kant. Zum Verhältnis Reinhold-Hölderlin-Fichte, in: Klaus Viertbauer (Hg): Präreflexives Selbstbewusstsein im Diskurs, Freiburg i. Brsg./München 2018, pp. 48–72.

6 Friedrich Hölderlin, “Über Urtheil und Seyn”. Trans. H. S. Harris, in H. S. Harris: Hegel’s Development: Towards the Sunlight 1770–1801, Oxford, 1972, p. 515.

7 From Hölderlin’s correction of the initially written question “May I say: I without self-consciousness?” to the question “How can I say ‘I’ without self-consciousness?” the rhetorical character of the latter question is to conclude (see StA IV, 217, line 4).

self-consciousness. The next step asks how self-consciousness is possible. This question is a question which concerns the logical possibility of self-consciousness, and this means that it concerns the logical structure of the concept of self-consciousness.

Now, let us look at the answer. It contains two parts: the first part refers to a mental activity by which as Hölderlin writes, “I oppose myself to myself”. There can be no doubt that such an activity of opposing refers to the formal features of representing, for to represent something I have to make a difference between the subject which represents and the object which is represented by the subject. This amounts to saying that they are opposed to each other. Therefore we can conclude that Hölderlin explains the fact of self-consciousness within the conceptual framework of representation – in other words Hölderlin seems to be a follower of a representationalist theory of self-consciousness.

But this is only the first part of the answer. The second part points to the fact that in the case of self-consciousness the subject and its object are identical and that the subject is aware of the fact that it is identical with the represented object. This is the meaning of the proposition that “in spite of this sundering I recognize myself *as the same* in the opposite.” Hölderlin seems to plead for self-consciousness as the result of some kind of a self-representing activity.

But now comes the crucial question: “But how far as the same?” Hölderlin gives an explanation that this question arises in view of the fact that the representing subject and the represented object are *not* the same as they must be recognized because they are opposite to each other. As just mentioned ‘being opposite to each other’ means that they have different logical functions: The subject which represents is not the subject which is represented, and obviously these functions cannot be reduced to or replaced by each other because they constitute the formal character of representing. But in self-consciousness the representing subject has to represent itself as the self-representing subject. In other words one can say that Hölderlin’s question “But how far as the same?” arises through what is widely known as the *de-se-constraint*. This is the constraint that in the case of self-consciousness the two relates must not only *be* identical but that they must be *recognized* by the subject *as* being identical. Within the framework of representationalism one cannot see how this is possible because the position of the object differs from the position of the subject and cannot be identified with the position of the subject. Exactly this is the reason of Hölderlin’s question “But how far as the same?”. That this question arises necessarily as Hölderlin’s holds (“... I must [raise this question]”) is due to the formal structure of representing which is also the basis of self-representing.

II.

Let us now turn to Hölderlin's answer to this question. I summarize his argument without quoting literally his terms. The leading thought can be described as follows: Within the framework of representationalism we cannot explain how self-consciousness is possible because we cannot explain how the consciousness of the identity of the subject and object of consciousness is possible. In order to understand the possibility of self-consciousness we have to move to quite another conceptual framework. This amounts to the claim that self-consciousness doesn't explain itself. We must abandon the concept of representation as the basic concept and introduce a new concept which cannot be described as a kind of an internal relation between two different terms. We rather have to describe them as existing in an original necessary conjunction. Only such an original conjunction represents the formal character of that unity which defines the concept of self-consciousness but which cannot be thought of under the condition of self-representation as a kind of representation, because representation consists in a relation between two different terms which is the formal structure of self-representation, too. As mentioned above Hölderlin calls this new concept of an original unity 'Being'; and he holds that this concept expresses "the joining of Subject and Object", and that they are "most intimately united in intellectual intuition". I will address these concepts later on.

Hölderlin, however, does not hold that this concept of Being replaces the concept of self-consciousness as a kind of self-representation. We rather have to maintain that self-consciousness is due to an act of self-representing. For this claim stand the question and its answer quoted above, "How can I say 'I' without self-consciousness? But how is self-consciousness possible? Precisely because I oppose myself to myself, but in spite of this sundering I recognize myself as the same in the opposite." Obviously, what is at stake here is not the formal structure of self-representation as such but the explanation of the cognition of the identity of the two different relates under the condition of self-representation.

Now we have seen that the self-representing structure is not able to explain the cognition of the identity of subject and object which defines the concept of self-consciousness. Therefore we have to admit that self-consciousness taken as a kind of self-representation is not a self-sufficient conception. Following Hölderlin its sufficient reason is to be found in that concept of an original and necessary conjunction of subject and object which he calls "Being".

III.

There are several questions which arise. Here again, we should be cautious. First of all we have to be aware of the specific character of our text; this character says something about the way Hölderlin uses the key concepts and about the kind of his argumentation. Certainly the text was intended for private use, perhaps for a discussion among friends. Therefore one cannot expect deeply elaborated arguments, and therefore one must be careful not to jump to conclusions about its systematic impact.

The second point concerns the content and the systematic function of the different sections of our text. Obviously, Hölderlin's chief interest here is not to develop a theory of self-consciousness but rather to clarify the distinction between the concepts of Being, Judgment and the relation between the categories of actuality and possibility in the last section, which need not interest us here. That the conceptual distinction is Hölderlin's chief interest is clear by the conclusion of the second section of the part of "Being". Here he writes: "So identity is not a uniting of Subject and Object that takes place absolutely, and so Identity is not equal to absolute Being." And this is the conclusion of the explanation of the initial proposition of this section: "But this Being must not be equated with Identity." Therefore one may say that Hölderlin's chief interest with regard to the difference between *Being* and *Judgment* consists in his attempt to clarify two concepts of unity, and this is shown by the introductory definitions of each section. This, by the way, explains Hölderlin's use of the concept of judgment in a metaphorical way as an original sundering. Hölderlin picked up this use from Fichte. In his *Lectures on Platner* of the winter-term 1794/95 which Hölderlin attended, Fichte had talked about judging as an original sundering.⁸

This leads us to the systematic background of our text. Hölderlin's interest in distinguishing two types of unity concerns the question of the basic principle of a philosophical theory: Being or Self-consciousness – that is the question of philosophy. And 'philosophy' means nothing other than 'philosophy after Fichte'. Therefore Hölderlin enters the stage of philosophy with a criticism of Fichte. Hölderlin's position seems clear: Being, not Self-consciousness is the basic principle of philosophy. But unfortunately, here things are not so clear as one might wish. This leads us back to the systematic questions of the theory of self-consciousness. And here we must have a look on Fichte's claims of self-consciousness.

8 Cf. Violetta Waibel: "Urtheilung" – "ursprünglich theilen", in: Gaier, Lawitschka, Rapp, Waibel (hg.): Hölderlin Texturen 2, Tübingen 1995, p. 120.

IV.

If one compares the Fichtean conception of self-consciousness in his early writings with our text there is no doubt that Fichte argues for exactly that idea of a “joining of Subject and Object” as a “unity which takes place absolutely” which Hölderlin named “Being”. The Fichtean “I” refers, to quote the well-known concept of our days, to a pre-reflective self-consciousness which by no means can be described as a kind of self-representation. To describe this kind of original self-awareness Fichte uses, as is also well known, the concept of intellectual intuition – as Hölderlin does with reference to his concept of Being. On the other hand, Fichte uses the concept of Being in his early *Doctrine of Science* in order to express the *reality* of the ‘I’ as the pre-reflective self-consciousness which is produced in a performative way by that very activity which produces the idea of ‘I’.⁹ The underlying thought is that the idea of ‘I’ is never wrong and necessarily refers to something real. Therefore for Fichte the term of ‘Being’ makes sense only with regard to the reality of the ‘I’ and the activity which produces the idea of ‘I’. Therefore it is equally true that the character of the being of the ‘I’ cannot be sundered, as Hölderlin has put it, “without destroying the essence of the thing that is to be sundered” – to quote Fichte: “The thing whose essence consists only in positing itself as being, is the ‘I’, as absolute subject.”¹⁰ Obviously Hölderlin’s description of Being is identical with Fichte’s description of the ‘I’. But Hölderlin does not call that unity ‘I’ but ‘Being’. Why?

The answer seems easy. For Hölderlin consciousness must always be thought of as a kind of intentionality, i.e. as consciousness of something, and as such it is bound to the formal relation of representation. Now self-consciousness is a kind of consciousness, therefore self-consciousness is bound to representation. This is the line of an argument which Hölderlin puts forward in a letter to Hegel from the 26th of January, 1795, when he writes with regard to the Fichtean ‘I’ that Fichte in the realm of theory wants to go beyond the limits of the fact of consciousness. This means that he wants to go beyond the limits of the formal structure of representation. As we have seen, Hölderlin himself by introducing the concept of Being goes beyond the limits of the fact of consciousness and its formal character of representation. That self-consciousness

9 This performative activity Fichte calls “Tathandlung” (engl. translation: factact). Cf. Stefan Lang: Fichtes Programm einer Geschichte performativen Selbstbewusstseins, in: System und Systemkritik um 1800. System der Vernunft – Kant und der deutsche Idealismus, Hg. v. Christian Danz/Jürgen Stolzenberg, Hamburg, Meiner, 2011, pp. 29–43.

10 “*Dasjenige, dessen Seyn (Wesen) blos darin besteht, daß sich selbst als seyend setzt, ist das Ich, als absolutes Subjekt.*” (GA I, 2; 259).

taken as self-representation depends on a kind of a non-relative conceptual unity called ‘Being’ comes to mind, as we have seen, only by analyzing the concept of self-consciousness. This analysis may be called a transcendental argument because it leads to the necessary condition under which the fact of self-consciousness is possible.

But here there must be a caveat. Till now we don’t know anything about the content of this unity except the formal description as an unseparable joining of subject and object – and this exactly is the way Fichte describes his ‘I’. Therefore the question arises, must we conclude that in actual fact Hölderlin still follows Fichte and that in actual fact there is no criticism of Fichte at all? I think that our present text can give no clear answer to this puzzling question. Therefore one should be cautious with any decisive claims about Hölderlin’s criticism of Fichte as far as we are concerned with the reflections of *Judgment and Being*.

However, if we have a look on other writings of Hölderlin there is no doubt that he uses ‘Being’ as a basic term which actually goes beyond the Kantian limits of theoretical philosophy and which goes beyond the epistemic structure of self-consciousness as a kind of self-representation and that this includes a criticism of Fichte. In the Kantian sense it may be called an *idea of reason* insofar as it refers to a concept of a whole. Especially in his novel *Hyperion* Hölderlin uses the concept of Being almost synonymously with “life” (*Leben*).¹¹ Here the concept of life refers to the idea of a comprehensive unity of all living beings including the idea of freedom as well as the idea of equality among all living beings. And this unity Hölderlin calls “Being in the highest meaning” or “Being, in *one* sense of the word”.¹² It refers to the idea of “being one with everything that lives” as Hölderlin says in *Hyperion*.¹³ As to the awareness of this kind of unity Hölderlin speaks of an *intellectual intuition*. With view to this use of the concept of Being we can conclude that Hölderlin holds that the Fichtean ‘I’ can only be explained by the formal structure of representation – and not as Fichte holds as a pre-reflective unity which can be given by an intellectual intuition. This pre-reflective unity cannot be called ‘I’, it must be thought of as “Being”, and it goes further than the Fichtean ‘I’. This is Hölderlin’s criticism of Fichte.

It’s important to see that viewed from this perspective, Hölderlin’s concept of an original sundering gets a new theoretical significance. In his novel “*Hyperion*” it stands for a special view of the history of mankind. The “theoretical sundering” which in our text is expressed by the proposition of self-consciousness “I am I” and which is said to function as the principle of theoretical knowledge

11 Cf. Kreuzer, Hölderlin-Handbuch, p. 229.

12 “Seyn im einzigen Sinne des Worts” (StA, 3, 236), cf. *ibid*.

13 “Eines zu seyn mit Allem, was lebt.” (StA 3, 9), cf. *ibid*.

as well as the “practical sundering” which consists in the opposition between the ‘I’ taken as the principle of reason-led activity and the world of experience, these sunderings are thought of as sunderings of that original ‘unity with everything that lives’. This unity, however, functions as the basic principle of human life, because the destination of mankind is to lose such a unity and to recreate it in the course of their history. From this perspective, the text of *Judgment and Being* can be read as a sketch of the principles of an idealistic theory of world history.

But we are not forced to do so. Hölderlin’s criticism of Fichte can be read as a sketch of a theory of self-consciousness. And now it is surprising to see that Fichte himself seems to have agreed to Hölderlin’s proposal later on – however in a metacritical attitude. This can be shown as follows.

V.

In the *Introduction* of his *System of Morals* of 1798 Fichte claims that philosophy must find

a point where the objective and the subjective are not at all distinct from one another but are completely one and the same. Our system establishes just such a point and then proceeds from there. The point in question is “I-hood” [*Ichheit*], intelligence, reason – or whatever one wishes to call it.¹⁴

It is obvious that Fichte follows the line of Hölderlin, but it is obvious, too, that Fichte uses Hölderlin’s idea of an unseparable unity in order to describe – against Hölderlin – his own original concept of the I, which he now calls “I-hood”. The second section runs as follows:

This absolute identity of the subject and the object in the I can only be inferred; it cannot be demonstrated, so to speak, ‘immediately’, as a fact of actual consciousness. As soon as any actual consciousness occurs, even if it is only the consciousness of ourselves, the separation [between subject and object] ensues. I am conscious of myself only insofar as I distinguish myself, as the one who is conscious, from me, as the object of this consciousness.¹⁵

14 Johann Gottlieb Fichte: *The System of Ethics*. According to the *Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*. Translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöllner, Cambridge 2005, p. 7.

15 *Ibid.*

It's surprising to see that Fichte speaks just like Hölderlin of separation as the formal character of consciousness and even of self-consciousness. And it sounds like a quotation of Hölderlin if Fichte says that "I am conscious of myself only insofar as I distinguish myself, as the one who is conscious, from me, as the object of this consciousness." This, of course, is a reference to the formal feature of representation discussed above. And even the first proposition that the "absolute identity of the subject and the object in the I can only be inferred" confirms our claim of that transcendental argument which leads to the condition under which the possibility of self-consciousness can be thought of. Following Fichte this condition is the 'I'. After the discussion above I must not emphasize that the Fichtean concept of identity is formally equal to Hölderlin's idea of an original joining of subject and object.

Therefore we can say that Fichte obviously follows that two-level theory of self-consciousness which is at the centre of Hölderlin's reflections in his *Judgment and Being*. The difference, however, has to be seen in the Fichtean conception of the original I, which refers to a pre-reflective unity of self-consciousness and which is beyond the limits of self-representation. In the view of Fichte this follows by the very nature of the concept of 'I' and by the logical structure of that mental activity which produces the thought 'I' by a performative act. This act realizes the original unity of the subject and object as the essence of the 'I' – which is that 'thing whose essence consists only in positing itself as being.' Hölderlin did not understand the essence of the 'I' – this would be Fichte's criticism of Hölderlin. And this Fichte shows by using Hölderlin's terms.¹⁶

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