

*The Contingency of the Self's Language: How We Create  
Our Stories by Using Language*

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**Abstract**

The most important part that creates the Self as “the knowing subject” or active entity with the proactive, purposeful and selective reception of the materials from reality, not merely a machine moved by external interactions is cognitive elements or consciousness framework. When we understand the cognition is a thinking process, the consciousness is the result that is formed by this process. A cognitive person does not only reflect on materials from reality but also re-creates the image of reality in his mind. We can call it is “the subjective image of the objective world,” or “the self-creation”. Consciousness itself has no meaning without being related to language. The unbreakable connection between consciousness and language is a guarantee of the existence and value of both concepts. To understand the Self’s consciousness, we must investigate it in its direct expression – language. It is a purely subjective system that human use to describe the reality and give it meaning. We can realize that the Self has been formed by the constantly changing elements of the consciousness; therefore, its immediate reality – language – must be placed within the adaptation in a specific context. My article will focus on the contingency of using language which is analyzed in the way we create the intermediate objects alongside their meaning: Firstly, the way we describe a real event in different meanings; Secondly, the way we create “the intermediate objects” carrying the meaning; Thirdly, the way we re-create the intermediate objects by reconstructing the historical objects.

Keywords: ethics, consciousness, the Self, contingency, language, self-creation, Richard Rorty, Tran Duc Thao

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## Introduction

I am currently a Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy at Graduate School of Humanities, Kobe University, Japan and was previously a philosophy lecturer at University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), Vietnam. Born in Vung Tau City, Vietnam, I was educated at University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam and graduated with a Bachelors and Master's degree in philosophy before spending six years teaching in UEH. I have begun my Ph.D. program at Kobe University, Japan from 2015 with the research focusing on human behavior and consciousness which based on the contingency of using language in a particular context and its relationship to the community.

## Content

### 1. There is no such thing like “nature of the world/reality” except the word “nature”

From the first wise men in Ancient Greece, philosophy has begun with questions about the universe, the absolute cause of reality, and the nature of human beings. The Rhetorical questions such as, “who am I; where did I come from; what is the cause of the universe?” represented the first steps of humankind overcoming the mystery of myth to create the necessary elements of rationality. Moreover, they were also forming the framework for “the Self,” in which human beings as “*the knowing subject*” (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 9) create meaning for the world via subjective viewpoint. In any explanations or dimensions, the world is not itself through human beings' representation. Religions, philosophies, or natural sciences always try to reach the fundamental nature of the world, including human nature, by creating new language systems time after time. After every major revolution in philosophy or science with a new vocabulary system, we think that we make another step toward reaching the fundamental nature of the world. This is because we “think” that the nature of the world/reality exists already as many layers and that our mission (in the thinking process) is “getting through” those layers step by step using an increasing number explanations and descriptions in order to “reach” that nature. However, we only expand our understanding of the different, various, and contingent appearances of the world/reality without any “reaching of nature” because the world/reality has no “nature”. That word is a pure presupposition from our standpoint to make the world meaningful. Science, or the way we try to explain the world/reality “*in the broadest possible sense of the term*” Kai Nielsen, *Richard Rorty in A Companion to Pragmatism*, 2009, p. 119) is the way we analyze our description of the world/reality. It is the description of our story, the understanding of our language, or the discovery of “*the knowing subject*”. In the social area, this kind of thinking can be realized in the setting of questions about ethical and political issues, such as, “what is good; what is bad; what are the duties of a citizen; what should we do as citizens in a community?” This understanding is based on the Platonic idea that the nature of things already exists and that our mission is just discovering or “reaching” it. The world does not have any “meanings.” The world exists for itself and by itself only. Before and after human existence, the world was and still remain as it is. Thus, when we talk about the “truth” or “nature of the world,” we are diving into

a debate that only revolves around language systems and the subjective views of human beings.

*Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but the descriptions of the world are not. Only the descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot.* (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 1989, p. 5)

We explain the world via our language systems and create its meaning through our worldviews. A rock by the river does not have any meaning or any ultimate cause. It is a rock lay on the riverbank as a small part of the world with its variety and contingency. We, the “*knowing subject*,” look at that rock and ask questions about its presence, such as, “where does it come from; what does it look like; and what functions can we use it for?” A romantic person may write a poem regarding how this rock’s sadness is a metaphor for his or her lonely life. We do not discover the “nature” of the world/reality. We “create” our “Self” via the way we explain the world/reality<sup>1</sup>. The way we make meaning of the world is one of the three elements that I refer to as the *practical elements* that creates “the Self”; the other two are the *physical* and the *cognitive elements*.

## **2. What is “the Self”?**

### *Physical elements*

To form “the Self,” we need a real person with the physical conditions of existence, that is, the biological factors in which not the living body only but also all of the contents that form the prior conditions for his or her mental and practical capabilities such as genes, ethnicity, substance structure, etc. Owing to their differences in approach and research tendencies, some researchers have ignored or underestimated

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, we also change the real to fit with our vision and understanding unintentionally such as the optical illusion that makes the moon becomes huge when it is near the horizon. In fact, according to precise measurements, the moon at the top is the larger than it is near the horizon of about 2%, due to the distance to observe more distant horizon. Recently, some neuroscientists began using the method of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to find out the cause of the brain interpret the visual information. When the moon gradually moves into the horizon, our eyes’ perspective of the moon will be smaller. We need for sure that the moon has not minimized; therefore, our brain will adjust the size observed that our eyes still see the moon in the same size as it moved into the horizon. However, the distance from our eyes to the moon is too large, and we cannot perceive the depth accurately. Our feeling about the distance of the horizon is larger than the position on top a lot so that this framework will fool the brain, makes us see the moon larger than its real size. “*If you estimate the distance between you and the moon as being larger, the brain performs a computation and decides the object must also be larger to fill the same space*” (Ralph Weidner, in “The Moon Illusion: why the moon looks so weirdly huge right near the horizon, Joseph Stromberg, 2015).

the genetic or biological side of the research on human consciousness, or they have separated the mind and body into two issues. From my standpoint, the *physical elements* are not only the material premises but also the conditionally initial reflection for human consciousness. For instance, a person with disabilities will differ from a person without disabilities in his or her thinking about the value of life or the state of feeling helpless; likewise, an African-American person is more likely to be very sensitive to attitudes and words referring to skin color and discrimination in a society that is mostly Caucasian.

### *Cognitive elements*

The Self cannot act as a living entity without his or her *cognitive elements* or *consciousness framework*, which can be separated into three factors: *the choice to focus of the mind*, *the self-designed capability of thinking and judgment structure*. The second element is the important part that creates “the Self” as “*the knowing subject*” or active entity with the proactive, purposeful and selective reception of the materials from reality, not merely a machine moved by external interactions. If the cognition is a thinking process, the consciousness is the result that is formed by this process. A cognitive person does not only reflect on materials from reality but also re-creates the image of reality in his mind subjectively. Lenin called this “*the subjective image of the objective world*,” and Rorty called it the “*self-creation*”. This is because that “*consciousness must first of all be studied in its ‘immediate reality’: language understood naturally in its general sense as gestural and verbal language*” (Tran Duc Thao, 1984, p. 4). The primitive bow-shaped gestures pointing at objects is an indication of the subject’s image outside itself to direct attention to objects. However, this gesture is only useful in the conditions of possible subjects look directly. In the primitive hunting conditions, the indirect signaled not require visual is crucial for the survival of humankind. Therefore, the single signaled by pronounced to express the bow-shaped gestures for other subjects is the primitive form of language. There is also the expression of ourselves in objects. This process comes from the adaptation to environmental change. Consciousness itself has no meaning without being related to “language.” The unbreakable connection between consciousness and language is a guarantee of the existence and value of both concepts. To understand the consciousness of “the Self,” we must investigate it in its direct expression. In this case, it is the consciousness’s language.

*First labor, after it and then with it speech – these were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man, which, for all its similarity is far larger and more perfect.* (Friedrich Engels, *The part played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man in Dialectics of Nature*, digital version by marxists.org, 1996)

However, the language system of “the Self” is only the product of the world/reality reflection. It is a purely subjective system that human beings use to describe the world/reality and give it meaning (for humans, I stress). Thus, we can realize that “the Self” has been formed by the constantly changing elements of our consciousness and its “*immediate reality*” – language must be placed within the adaption according a concrete and specific context.

The diversity of a particular vocabulary or language depends on social conditions where that language system is formed. Some vocabularies make sense in this community but pointless in other communities because things, phenomena, and processes that those vocabularies express do not appear in the social conditions of other communities. Characteristics of an individual or community depend on natural conditions where individuals and social communities have been formed in an organic relation. If the features of a person or the community are expressed in language, as the shell material of thinking, so those characteristics depend on the material conditions of the individual and the community.

In origin, language is the tool of thinking, but once the language appeared, people hardly able to think outside language. You could argue that the arts, such as music or painting does not need language (speaking language)? In fact, even in music and painting, when you compose, study or enjoy, we still need an implicit language, a kind of “internal discourse,” what we call “ideology” or “message” of those works. Furthermore, not only in art but also in daily life, every act of human is meant by implicit language. For example, a girl is invited by a guy to have dinner for the first time on Saturday night. When preparing outfits, she would wonder: “Should I do not dress too splendid? If wearing too beautiful, he may think I like him obviously. If wearing too simple, he may think I lack aesthetic, or despise him. So I should wear this shirt, this dress, to still beautiful, still let him know that I have feelings for him but no too scrambling, etc.” Something like that “internal discourse” has always played the cross-cutting role through the meaningful social-actions of the human.

The most significant capability that forms “the Self” is “self-creation” through use of this language system. The Self’s language has three functions: *pointing at the object (directly or indirectly)*, *creating the object’s meaning*, and *identification of the Self*. This is because the language you speak not only shows what you do but who you are. All of the experiences or social relations that you have will be expressed in your language in a particularly circumstance. For instance, an economics lecturer will have a different description on a social event than would a lawyer and likewise a manual laborer will explain his future in a manner unlike that of a politician. Language can represent your identity, characteristics and personality. Furthermore, the “consciousness framework” is not constant or fixed. Its features can be altered by the changing of the world/reality or within itself. When we explain an individual’s personality, it is common sense that we should look back on the past events or stories that have effected (directly or indirectly) who that individual is at present or even predict his future behavior. These events or stories are not just his experiences, memories, etc. but also the point of view that forms his way of thinking. However, if he changes his standpoint or the way in which he understands these events or stories, he probably changes his “Self.” This contingency is a feature of the “self-creation.” An individual will create his aspect of characteristics and personality when he takes part in the interaction with his social relations that form his experience, knowledge, attitudes, opinion, vision, needs, etc. The aspect of characteristics and aspect of personality create the *colored glasses* with its distinctive features representing the perspective of their owner. The way that the *colored glasses* owner expresses his judgment about objects with different colors depending on the dimensions of each person. From Rorty’s analysis, human language system can be changed inexpertly and

rapidly through every step of social progress rather than ivory tower conversations of the intellectual elite.

*Rorty contends that morality is a vocabulary and as such it is a poetic achievement, dependent upon the cultural sources from which it is composed, and thus always contingent. (Scott Holland, Self-Creation and Social Solidarity in Richard Rorty's Secular Eschatology)*

For instance, the French Revolution in the eighteenth century provided the new vocabulary system in philosophy, politics, and laws by bold social proposals on human right, justice. Besides, the Romantic poets can take a more prominent role than the realistic simulations by using the “self-creation” of the artist to express the emotion and personalized the personality of “*the knowing subject*.” This is also the way Martin Heidegger described how poets could overcome the simple communication means towards *the opening a realm of life function*. Unlike the logical arguments with the stable causal relationship on true or false, poets always open an open space and an unanswered spot in which the individual who is released from the founding the truth mission to be free following the making the truth mission of a creativity subject. Heidegger also objected conventional notions merely see language as a tool to inform and communicate. Language is a dimension of existence of human life: “*Language is the house of being*” (Martin Heidegger, *Letter on “Humanism”*, translated by Frank A. Capuzzi, p.254). A work of art opens up a realm of life as a way for the truth happening, an architectural work opens up a realm of life for the occupation of human.

The “Self-creation” can be applied in reality in the way we create “the intermediate objects” alongside their meaning:

1. In the way we *describe a real event* (in the past or present) in different ways in the meaning of language; therefore, we can able to create our stories. For example, the Vietnam War can be told and taught as a fail of the United States of America in military and foreign policy to honor the Vietnamese military's victory (from the mainstream media information in Vietnam); however, it can be understood as the withdrawal of U.S because they did not want to intervene in the internal affairs of Vietnam anymore (from the Vietnamese refugee communities in many countries);
2. In the way we *create “the intermediate objects”* (especially in the symbolic historical objects) carrying the meaning (historical value system). This is also the way we mark our existence as the reality active renovation organism. The pyramids in Egypt, the Ancient Greece Temples or the Taj Mahal – the everlasting loving tomb -, etc. are the objects that express our identity in the thinking of planning, the construction process as well as in the shape and aesthetic patterns. Apparently, an Islamic style curved dome cannot appear in Egypt 2000 years B.C. or the Ionic stone columns cannot be built as central pillars of a tomb in India in the seventeenth century. All these intermediate objects and their nonverbal messages are made by the particular social contexts in which are not only the way we express our belief or religious, but also the visible relying point that reminds us of those stories whenever we read, see, heard or think of those intermediate objects;

3. In the way we *re-create the intermediate objects* by reconstructing the historical objects. For instance, when the Japanese rebuilt the Osaka Castle, apparently they didn't want to build the defensive castle as the way it had to be. From the practical need, a feudal period castle style is useless at present. Japanese reborn that castle as a symbol of their history – a historical mark in which they can use to remind people of their stories and emphasize the uninterrupted milestones in the history process. In this sense, we can re-create our story by re-creating the intermediate objects. Through these practical behaviors, we can re-create the reality; it means, creates “the Self” which belongs to the reality in its realistic and pragmatic. This way includes some liar stories that we create to serve the political and historical purpose intentionally and make them “real.” History is a story of human, communities, nations with their particular standpoint. Napoleon Bonaparte said: “*What is history but a fable agreed upon*”, and Joseph Goebbels – Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945 also confirmed that: “*If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it*”. One of the most familiar stories to describe this tendency is the heroic models that have been created for propaganda purpose (similar with the fiction character named “Comrade Ogilvy” in the novel “1984” of George Orwell). Those heroes don't exist; however, because of the political needs, human creates their “Self” with all elements of a real person such as a name, a childhood with a dedicated dream, honorable victories, pure love, and last but not least, a brave death. To make them immortal, human just put their names on the streets, buildings, parks, schools, etc. At the end, the majority of people will believe in those characters with their stories, their life which has been made by human with a useful weapon, a purposeful language system.

### *Practical elements*

The third element of “the Self” is the two-way interaction between “the Self” and the social context. This element includes two factors: *the materials of thinking* that come from the world/reality (the historical and political circumstances concretely) and *the expressions* of an individual in a particular context. The materials of thinking take the primary position in forming human consciousness that is the dynamic and creative reflection of reality into our mind.

*(...) the direct connection between consciousness and the external world; it is the transformation of the energy excitation into the fact of consciousness. (Lenin, Collected Works 14, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, digital reprints by marx2mao.com, 2010, p. 51)*

This opinion was made clearer and detailed in Tran Duc Thao's analysis, in which human consciousness has been built by three periods in turns: first, *the sparkling consciousness* from the origins; then, *the collective consciousness* in the popularization; and finally, finishing the popularization in *the individual consciousness*. All of these periods come from the initial interaction signals of the labor process in the world/reality.

These terms are also the only possible way we can “see” an individual’s “Self” visually while the physical conditions are just the premises that we conjecture are the cognitive tendency of “the Self.” I named this third part as the *practical elements*. It does not contain only human activities, but also includes an *activity space* where “the Self” expresses to the world/reality its existence and characteristics. In other words, the physical side comprises the material factors and affects “the Self,” while the mental side shapes “the Self” with social relations and historical/political contexts, and the practical side is the way in which “the Self” is expressed to the outside world<sup>2</sup>.

*Our languages, as much as our bodies, are shape by our environment. Our languages could no more be ‘out of touch’ with our environment (grandiosely the world) than our bodies could.* (Kai Nielsen, Richard Rorty in *A Companion to Pragmatism*, 2009, p. 132)

“The Self” does not exist without its historical and political circumstances. It is formed by a particular context and expresses its existence via various appearances in specific cases. Furthermore, it can only be understood when put into a particular situation alongside specific effects and constraints. How can we understand Admiral Yamamoto’s decision to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941 if we do not figure out the social pressures and personal ties that he had in that context? What did happen in Magda Goebbels’s mind when she decided to kill all six of her children in May 1945 because she could not let her beautiful children grow up in the communist institution that was the Nazis’ enemy? How can we feel exactly the emotions of Archimedes when he discovered the way to solve the case of King Hiero II’s golden crown, a man who lived 22 centuries before us? That is the reason why Richard Rorty stressed that there is no historical inevitability or any fixed patterns for social movements.

*The only point on which I would insist is that philosopher’s moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation”* (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1979, p. 394).

Contingency and self-adaption are the ways societal movements and “the Self,” as a reflected side of society, are formed with “*the development of self-recognition and self-reference in the process of reciprocal interaction and recognition of/with others*” (Jacinthe Baribeau, 1986, p. 56).

As a member of a society that is always mobilizing and changing, “the Self” has to take part in the social relations where it has been formed. The interaction between “the Self” and society is indicated in various ways, but the mode that describes this relationship most clearly belongs to two historical, philosophical concepts: *duties* and *rights*. The first concept is the ethical demand from society to its member regarding awareness of the member’s role and obligations to the community in which he or she

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<sup>2</sup> Obviously, there is only one world/reality. Even the “internal world” that we usually call “spirit or inside world” to pointed out our thinking process, opinions, beliefs, needs, dreams, passions, ambitions, etc. is also the reflection from the “outside world” to our mind creating the mental element of “the Self”.



is a vital link; like “*one should never breach any law since you have benefitted from society. The benefits include your parent’s meeting, having their marriage legally honored which lead to your existence, nourishment, and education*”<sup>3</sup>. The second concept is the demands of an individual, as a member with awareness, to the community regarding the rights and benefits of an individual that must be satisfied to ensure his or her existence as a living entity, as well as a creative and proactive entity. These two concepts both conflict and support one another. The conflict comes from two subjects that are apparently separate: society and the individual. Naturally, these are two objects that have differences in their approach to issues and their expressive characteristics; they have already exhibited many contradictions in human history when the individual often pursues the extension and serving of itself while the society requires the obedience of the individuals for the stability of common value systems. Certainly, there is no purely freed individual: the *activity space* (freedom) of an individual is limited by the *activity space* (freedom) of others. When there are too many individuals involved in a practical space, the will of an individual will be affected by the will of others. However, the above concepts (duties and rights) do not conflict in their denotation and significant value. They belong to the human language system that includes representations of “the Self” in relation to itself and the social context in which it has been formed. The arguments about the meaning of these concepts are “*uselessness*” and “*unintelligibility*” (Karl Nielsen, 2009, p.129) because it is nothing more than an argument about arguments. They only make sense when one follows their practical value and humanity when they are placed in a particular circumstance wherein their meaning can be explained by their adaptation to the transformation of objective reality.

## **Conclusion**

In today’s world of diverse value systems and constant change, the identification of the Self’s dignity is not only important for the purpose of forming an individual’s creative activities; it is also beneficial for the building of the legal systems in which the harmony between personal benefits and community interests plays a key role in the sustainable development of society. This must come first and foremost from awareness of the contingency of the self and the community. Moreover, it is because there is no common formula for the movement of social history; therefore, every judgment about an individual or national strategic policies must be based on pragmatic and flexible thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://moralities.wordpress.com/2011/03/20/plato-and-socrates-on-duty/>

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