

## Instinct and Ego: Nietzsche's perspective

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**Abstrakt:** In Nietzsche's thought the criticism of the concept of ego occupies a dominant position. In Nietzsche's philosophy, the ego--both as a moral and as an epistemological subject--has received a serious criticism. Nietzsche views that the concept of ego, reason and consciousness have resulted from the breakup of human existence from a more natural state - a state in which instinctual activity dominated the human life. Nietzsche's concept of ego is closely related to his understanding of human instincts. The following article is an attempt to see the connection between the concept of ego and human instincts in Nietzsche's philosophy.

**Keywords:** instinct, ego, Nietzsche.

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The concept of “I” or ego plays two important functions in human life. These two functions are; it is the subject of the verb ‘to know’ and second, it is the subject of the verb ‘to do.’ When a certain object is known, it is known by a subject, and this subject is the ego or “I.” Similarly, when an act is done, it is done by an agent or a doer, and that doer is the ego or “I.”

This ego or “I” is the precondition of all knowing and action. Owing to its importance, the concept of ego has always been a point of discussion in philosophy. Nietzsche has also discussed this concept, and his discussion on the ego does two things. First, it informs us that the concept “I” or ego does not have an objective correlative. Second, his discussion presents an evaluation of this concept, to tell us that it is pretty useful as a knower but a bondage and a cage as a doer. As a doer, the ego is nothing but a snare set by the powerful to snatch the liberty of the humans to enslave them. In his analysis of the concept of ego as the doer of a deed, Nietzsche seems to unmask the devil in the guise of a saint.

## **The Ego as the precondition of knowledge and reason**

Nietzsche has adopted certain important positions regarding the concept of ego; for him, like many other philosophers, “I” is the precondition of all knowledge and consequently, that of reasoning. He, however, has denied the common view that the ego possesses reality. For him the ego is not a fact but a fiction, an article of faith, a pragmatic necessity. Nevertheless, he regards that this fiction is necessary to carry out the operations of reason – whereas reason is an instrument that ensures survival in a precarious world.

This most important human instrument, reason, grounds its conclusions on concepts. Therefore, for the operations of reason, a memory of the conceptual knowledge is necessary; reason requires the raw material of concepts to wield its conclusion.

These concepts do not change. They remain self-identical, well preserved within their silhouettes. And this self-identity of the concepts is guaranteed to them by the self-identity of the ego itself.

Humans live in a precarious world, in which they have to deal with entities, sometimes hostile, and sometimes beneficial to them. The Karma or the action of everything is understood from a human reference, which, being the reference point of all knowing remains selfsame and fixed.

It is the relation between the knower and the beings it knows, that constitutes the concept. Nietzsche says that one designates only the relations of things to man<sup>2</sup>. In the concept of a lion, it is the human perspective that has shaped the concept. The human relationship with lion is encoded in the concept of a lion. If human beings evolve to become 60 meter giants, their relationship with the lions will certainly be changed, and consequently the concept “lion” will also be changed.

This gives human existence a central position in giving meaning to the world around it. It is in relationship to the ego that the concepts remain selfsame.

Nietzsche writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, F., *On Truth and Lies, In: Friedrich Nietzsche, The birth of tragedy and other writings.* Cambridge University Press, 1999. Available Online: [http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth\\_and\\_Lie\\_in\\_an\\_Extra-Moral\\_Sense.htm](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Nietzsche/Truth_and_Lie_in_an_Extra-Moral_Sense.htm)

*“Must all philosophy not ultimately brings to light the precondition upon which the process of reason depends? - our belief in the “ego” as a substance, as the sole reality from which we ascribe reality to things in general.”<sup>3</sup>*

This position taken by him is the same as taken by Fichte, who says that it is the ego that ascribes the self-identity to the objects. The most certain empirical truth that can be posited about anything is the identity of that thing to itself. This truth is embodied in the proposition  $A=A$ . Any object A is simply identical to itself! Fichte asks the question: what is the ground for considering this proposition as true? His answer is that the ego is the ground for the truth of the proposition  $A=A$ . He says:

*“We started with the proposition  $A=A$ , not as if the proposition, “I am” could be proven by it, but because we had to start with a certain proposition, given in empirical consciousness. And our development, also has shown that  $A=A$  does not contain the ground of “I am” but on the contrary, that the later proposition is the ground of former.”<sup>4</sup>*

The ego is the precondition of all knowing, for it gives its own self-identity, to the concepts. “I am” is the reference point for all knowing, for it is in relation to this “I am” that everything else is known.

## **The Ego as a transcendental Unity**

The principle of self-identity establishes that the ego is identical to itself and remains so forever. If it never changes, it must be reckoned as a transcendental being, something that is not subjected to the law of succession and time. The ego is a transcendental being; a transcendental unity.

Our ego is simply an ever present, complete and selfsame unity! The ego is not subjected to the conditionality of time; it transcends time. The ego is regarded as the eternal and the indestructible.

Nietzsche has regularly confronted the above mentioned traditional idea that there lies a self-same transcendental reality, something that never changes and always remains identical to itself. To deconstruct this notion of ego, he has attempted to question its unity, for if the unity of ego is challenged, its self-identity is automatically questioned!

For instance, he attempted to achieve this end in his analysis of the phenomenon of will. Will manifests itself in the succession of time, yet, according to the common belief, the subject of the will remains selfsame, and remains behind the will as a unity that never changes. Nietzsche’s point is this that what we recognize as the subject of the will, is not a unity, but a multiplicity. It is not something selfsame, but a succession of impulses. Let us see what he wants to say!

In willing, according to Nietzsche, many things happen. It is not as simple as to say that there is a will that is directed towards an object, and a subject of will, desiring that object! Willing as a process is far more complex.

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<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, F., *Will to Power*, Tr. by W. Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books, 1967. Available online: [http://evankozierachi.com/uploads/Nietzsche\\_-\\_The\\_Will\\_To\\_Power\\_-\\_Trans\\_Kaufmann.pdf](http://evankozierachi.com/uploads/Nietzsche_-_The_Will_To_Power_-_Trans_Kaufmann.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, Tr. by A. E Kroeger, Forgotten Books 2012. Available online: [https://archive.org/stream/thescienceofknow00fichuoft/thescienceofknow00fichuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/thescienceofknow00fichuoft/thescienceofknow00fichuoft_djvu.txt)

Willing, first of all involves an urge to change a state for the other. A person feeling pain would want to change his state from pain to no pain. A person who wants to learn music desires to become skillful. Such a person might experience a multiplicity of impulses in him before opting for the learning of music. His other interests will interfere with his interest in music. These other interests could be reading, laziness, sleeping, eating, etc. That person can succeed in learning music only after defeating all other interests. His interests will compete against each other till a winner emerges.

Willing involves a battle, a struggle among varied impulses desirous to follow their own directions, for more than one impulses are generated by the unconscious mind. The strongest impulse succeeds in taming the others and rejoices; and we interpret this joy as our free will! Hence, in identifying ourselves with the victor, we become the commander, and rest of our impulses become the slaves! However, the point to be noted is that the phenomenon of willing presupposes a division in the subject itself; those impulses that obey and the one that commands.

This internal division of the subject, as the commander and the executor of the will, destroys the unity of the ego. The ego no longer remains one, neither selfsame. Nietzsche says:

*"A man who wills commands something within himself which renders obedience, or which he believes renders obedience. ...In as much as in the given circumstances we are at the same time the commanding and the obeying parties, and as the obeying party we know the sensations of constraint, impulsion, pressure, resistance, and motion...inasmuch as, on the other hand we are accustomed to disregard this duality, and to deceive ourselves about it by means of the synthetic term I."*<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the term I or the ego obscures the reality. The reality of whatever happens inside us is akin to what happens in a society, where the powerful commands and the weaker obeys. It is not the affair of one soul, but of many souls!

This multiplicity destroys the unity of the ego and suggests that the ego, or the subject, manifests itself in the succession of time. Like all other phenomenon of the world, the ego or the subject, for it is the multiplicity of the impulses, is also subjected to the law of time. Ego is not a transcendental unity.

However, one can argue here that even though the unity of the ego and its identity to itself is rightly questioned here, it does not imply that nothing remains selfsame. The impulses remain selfsame. The idea  $A=A$ , the law of self-identity is still applicable to the case of the individual impulses. Each impulse, a commander or an executor, remains selfsame! A commander is a commander and an executioner is an executioner! They are self-identical, and that identity is grounded nowhere else but in the ego.

Perhaps, it is after noticing this point alone, that Nietzsche convinced himself of the inevitability of positing an ego behind the knowledge. The knowing subject is essential. About soul atomism Nietzsche writes:

*"Let it be permitted to designate by this expression the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, and indivisible, as a monad, as an atom: this belief ought to be expelled from science! Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary at all to get rid of the soul thereby, and thus renounce one of the oldest and most venerated hypothesis-...the way is open for new acceptations and refinements of the soul hypothesis; and such conceptions as*

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. By Hellen Zimmer, Dover Publications, 1997. Section: On the Prejudices of Philosophers, Available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>

*“mortal soul”, and “soul of subjective multiplicity” and soul as social structure of instincts and passions.”*<sup>6</sup>

## The Ego as a Doer and the suppression of Instincts

It appears, that Nietzsche does not accept the concept of the doer of a deed even on pragmatic grounds! He has written a lot to deconstruct the moral subject. He observes an ill intent behind the creation of the moral subject. He has never accepted the moral subject, the doer of the deed, or the one responsible for his acts.

Why Nietzsche has rejected the moral subject? To find the answers to this question, it is necessary to understand Nietzsche’s idea of life and instincts. For the creation of the epistemological and moral subject, in his view, is closely related to the failure of instincts. For Nietzsche, the emergence of morality, reason, consciousness, ego, and the organized society; all are tied to one phenomenon; the suppression of instincts and the replacement of instinctual guidance with reason and consciousness.

The break from instincts, from human nature, rendered the instincts useless, and the organism had to develop a new instrument—the reason.

Nietzsche gives a great importance to the instincts. His concept of instinct is largely derived from the works of Hartmann and Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer defines instinct as a will whose object is unknown. A volition carries a motivation, an object as an idea towards which the subject of the will has to move. There are two possibilities regarding this object of will; either it is known to the consciousness, or it is unknown. If the object or the purpose of the will remains unknown, it is called instinct. Schopenhauer writes:

*“An act done by instinct differs from every other kind of act in that an understanding of its object does not precede it but follows upon it. Instinct is therefore a rule of action given à priori. We may be unaware of the object to which it is directed, as no understanding of it is necessary to its attainment. On the other hand, if an act is done by an exercise of reason or intelligence, it proceeds according to a rule which the understanding has itself devised for the purpose of carrying out a preconceived aim. Hence it is that action according to rule may miss its aim, while instinct is infallible.”*<sup>7</sup>

The unknown object of willing in the instinct is termed as the unconscious idea by Hartmann. In willing, there are two constituents; a purpose, given as an idea, and a mean to attain to that purpose, again given to the consciousness as an idea. In conscious willing one knows both; the end and the means. However, in the unconscious willing, one only knows the means, but the end is never given. Hartmann writes:

*“Instinct is conscious willing of the means to an unconsciously willed end. This conception explains in an unforced and simple way the whole problem offered by instinct.”*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. By Hellen Zimmer, Dover Publications, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Moral Instinct*, available online: <http://www.egs.edu/library/arthur-schopenhauer/articles/the-essays-of-arthur-schopenhauer-on-human-nature/moral-instinct/>

<sup>8</sup> Edouard Von Hartmann, *The Philosophy of Unconscious*, tr by : William Chatterton Coupland, New York: Routledge 2010. Available online: <https://archive.org/stream/philosophyofunco01hartiala#page/n13/mode/2up>

For example, the sex instinct creates a will, and an organism mates with the members of the opposite sex of its species. The organism, however, does not have the knowledge of the purpose behind this activity, which is procreation.<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche has pointed out this fact when he wrote:

*“Marriage: So call I the will of the twain to create the one that is more than those who created it.”<sup>10</sup>*

Marriage is the means but the child is the purpose.

Instinct is the conscious will that knows the means, but not the purpose. The purpose, on the other hand, is unfolded in the passage of time. Despite the fact that this unconscious idea is not known, yet its presence is felt, and this feeling of the presence of a higher but unknown purpose accompanies the organism throughout the life and remains selfsame. This unconscious idea is felt all the time, as the binding force of the instinct or the unconscious will. An organism knows that it is acting under a necessity, but does not know any representation of that necessity other than a feeling! And it is this perpetual feeling of necessity and compulsion to act in the direction of the achievement of the unconscious idea that gives a unity to the successive acts of life. In fact it is this persistent feeling of the necessity of the unconscious idea that finds its counterpart in the world of consciousness in the form of the ego.

Life being the foundation of instincts and emotions, posits this unconscious idea. Thus, no one is free from its compulsion. Human conscious activities, even the philosophical thought, is not free of it. For Nietzsche the greater part of conscious thinking is instinctive. He writes:

*“I now say to myself that the greater part of conscious thinking must be counted towards the instinctive thinking.”<sup>11</sup>*

In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, this has found a more pronounced expression, where he apportioned a lesser status to ego, or the thinking subject as compared to a wise sage called Self. He writes:

*“The self is ever listening and self-seeking; it compares, compels, conquers, and destroys. It rules and is also the I’s ruler. Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty commander, an unknown wise man—he is called self....Your self laughs at your ego and its proud leaps. “What are these leaps and flights to me?” it says to itself. “A detour to my purpose. I am the leading reins of the I and the prompter of its conception.”<sup>12</sup>*

This concept of the self, as a wise sage, a mighty commander, directly points towards the unconscious activity of the human body that mainly expresses itself in the form of instincts. The ego here is considered merely as an instrument of the instincts and the unconscious. Life for Nietzsche, moves towards its own ends, on its own paths that are not necessarily known to the ego. Ego merely serves these ends of the life without being conscious of them.

The reality of man lies in his instincts! Instincts are the guide of a man in this world. He has to fulfill the commands of this mighty commander that never discloses its aims, but keeps a man’s efforts focused on the acquisition of the means.

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<sup>9</sup> Hartmann, Edouard Von. The Philosophy of Unconscious, Tr by : William Chatterton Coupland, New York: Routledge 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, tr by: Thomas Common, New York: Dover Publications 1999. Available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998.txt>

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, F. Beyond Good and Evil, tr. By Hellen Zimmer, Dover Publications, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, tr by: Thomas Common, New York: Dover Publications 1999.

The instincts set these hidden goals before organisms, and through their unmistakable knowledge, they also guide the organism in dealing with the existential threats.<sup>13</sup> So, certain members of the animal kingdom kill their natural enemies without even knowing the purpose why they do so. Certain animals recognize the danger hidden in their adversaries and deal accordingly with them.

Consciousness, or the reflexive reason, that presupposes ego, and lies merely in the self-realization of ego, is for Nietzsche something yet inferior to the instincts. Nietzsche considers consciousness as the last and latest development of the organic, and consequently also the most unfinished and least powerful of these developments.

Consciousness can allow a man to err, and its errors can cause a man, or a nation to break down earlier than might be necessary. Instincts can be weakened by wrong choices of consciousness. Nietzsche writes:

*"If the conserving bond of the instincts were not very much more powerful, it would not generally serve as a regulator : by perverse judging and dreaming with open eyes, by superficiality and credulity, in short, just by consciousness, mankind would necessarily have broken down : or rather, without the former there would long ago have been nothing more of the latter ! Before a function is fully formed and matured, it is a danger to the organism. "*<sup>14</sup>

The theme of a break from nature is not something new in philosophy! The creation of ego, consciousness, morality and reason have been attributed to a change in human life--a change that had ushered from man's separation from his natural state--- by various philosopher! For instance Hegel's interpretation of the fall of man is quite important to understand this relationship between the separation of man from his nature or instincts and the emergence of reason, ego and moral subject. The fall of man is interpreted as the separation of man from the nature. It is also pointed out as the birth of reflexive consciousness in humans. The fall was the point, when man attained self-awareness. Since, the ego is essentially self-awareness, it was also the point of the creation of ego. Hegel writes:

*"Man is pictorially represented by the religious mind in this way; it happened once as an event with no necessity about it, that he lost the form of harmonious unity with himself by plucking the fruits of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and was driven from the state of innocence, from paradise..."*<sup>15</sup>

That break with the nature, pointed out by Hegel, is the break from the instincts for Nietzsche—the event that preceded the development of consciousness in humans.

In many respects, Nietzsche's concept of consciousness is akin to the concept of consciousness in the philosophy of his predecessors. His notion of Consciousness is akin to the reflexive consciousness in Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer writes:

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<sup>13</sup> Hartmann, Edouard Von. *The Philosophy of Unconscious*, Tr by : William Chatterton Coupland, New York: Routledge 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, tr by ; Thomas Common, available online: [https://archive.org/stream/completenietasch10nietuoft/completenietasch10nietuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/completenietasch10nietuoft/completenietasch10nietuoft_djvu.txt)

<sup>15</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, tr by: J B. Baille, available online: [http://home.lu.lv/~ruben/Vestures\\_filozofija/Hegel-The%20Phemenology%20of%20Mind.pdf](http://home.lu.lv/~ruben/Vestures_filozofija/Hegel-The%20Phemenology%20of%20Mind.pdf)

*“It is just this new form of consciousness (reflective)... which gives man that thoughtfulness which distinguishes his consciousness entirely from that of the lower animals.”<sup>16</sup>*

It is the emergence of reason in humans, in the form of reflexive consciousness that separates them from the brutes. Reflexive consciousness is different from the animal consciousness. Animals are also aware of the objects that cause sensations in their bodies. They can identify the cause of their sensations as the external bodies present out there. This is what Schopenhauer calls understanding. Yet, beyond this understanding is the faculty of reason that creates awareness of a different type of objects. These objects are concepts.

Human beings are able to form concepts of the data they receive from their sensation or perceptual understanding. On the basis of these concepts they possess a greater memory of their past experiences. Not only they possess these concepts as the general idea of the things they experience, but they can also form judgments on the basis of these concepts through the employment of reason. Reason requires abstract concepts, which are derived from the perception, but unlike the things in nature, they are not subjected to the law of time and space.

This emergence of reason in humans was caused by a great catastrophe; a catastrophe that had resulted from the separation of humans from their instincts. Nietzsche has alluded to this event in the human prehistory in his *Genealogy of Morals*, he writes:

*“...some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and a master race which organized on a war footing, and with the power to organize, unscrupulously lays its dreadful paws on a populace which, though it might be vastly greater in number is still shapeless and shifting.”<sup>17</sup>*

A master race conquered the vast majority of the human population and established the first state like organization in the human history. The society they had established did not allow the expression of instincts, and that according to Nietzsche was the cause of such a misery in humankind that like of it had never happened before or after it.

Hence, ideally speaking, an organism follows a certain path throughout its life span. This path is certainly dictated to it by its instincts. Life seems nothing more than the obedience of instincts! And it is these instincts, whose necessity is binding upon man, however, these instincts were suppressed in the society established by the conquerors belonging to a master race.

Nietzsche has alluded to this phase in the human history to hypothesize the emergence of the bad conscience in humans. Yet the same goes true for the creation of the ego as moral and epistemological subject. It is the moral subject who was thus made responsible for its acts by a master race. The doer was added to the deed to meet the requirements of the retributive justice. That same turn of events in the human history was also responsible for the emergence of reason or the reflective consciousness and ego as a thinker of thought.

That suppression of instincts resulted in a great trouble and pain. Nietzsche has equated the resulting plight of the humanity to that of a certain type of marine creatures who were thrown on the dry land. He writes:

*“Just like the things water animals must have gone through when they were forced either to become land animals or to die off, so events must have played themselves out with this half-*

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<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer, A., *The World as Will and Idea*, tr. by: R B. Haldane and J Kemp, available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, F., *Genealogy of Morals*, tr. by Ian Johnston, available online: <http://home.sandiego.edu/~janderso/360/genealogytofc.htm>

*beast so happily adapted to the wilderness, war, wandering around, adventure—suddenly all its instincts were devalued and “disengaged.” From this point on, these animals were to go on foot and “carry themselves”; whereas previously they had been supported by the water. A terrible heaviness weighed them down. In performing the simplest things they felt ungainly. In dealing with this new unknown world, they no longer had their old leaders, the ruling unconscious drives which guided them safely—these unfortunate creatures were reduced to thinking, inferring, calculating, bringing together cause and effect, reduced to their “consciousness,” their most impoverished and error-prone organ! I believe that never on earth has there been such a feeling of misery, such a leaden discomfort—while at the same time those old instincts had not all of a sudden stopped imposing their demands! Only it was difficult and seldom possible to do their bidding.”<sup>18</sup>*

Through the suppression of instincts man was made to obey the rules of the society, and in doing so he was unable to obey his instincts. He was separated from his nature, from his own self, and was condemned to a miserable existence.

That was the point that was marked as the beginning of the creation of soul in humans. Nietzsche writes:

*“All instincts which are not discharged to the outside are turned back inside—this is what I call the internalization of man. From this first grows in man what people later call his “soul.” The entire inner world, originally as thin as if stretched between two layers of skin, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, width, and height, to the extent that what a person discharged out into the world was obstructed. Those frightening fortifications with which the organization of the state protected itself against the old instincts for freedom—punishments belong above all to these fortifications—brought it about that all those instincts of the wild, free, roaming man turned themselves backwards, against man himself. Enmity, cruelty, joy in pursuit, in attack, in change, in destruction—all those turned themselves against the possessors of such instincts.”<sup>19</sup>*

The ego as the epistemological subject, as the precondition for the operation of reason, serves a great need here. The ego acted as an instrument to reconcile the new reality with the older one. Reason gathered knowledge in the form of concepts and learned to deduce valid judgments to solve the problems confronting man. It was a tactic adopted by the humans, who were suddenly deprived of the guidance of instincts, to deal with the precarious situations.

The moral subject, the doer of the deed or the slave of the state is invented to create a regularity in behavior as opposed to the instinctual responses to the environment. The member of a state should be predictable, should behave according to the set norms. And this requires responsibility. Hence, the master race made people responsible for their acts. They taught them good and bad and bid them to follow the norm.

## Conclusion

Nietzsche’s views on the ego suggest that he treats the two manifestations of the ego differently. For him, the ego as an epistemological subject is to be retained on pragmatic grounds. For, in order to know something, it should be believed that the known thing is selfsame. An anti-thesis to this self-identity of a thing was presented by Heraclitus, who denies self-identity to the things.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Heraclitus' position on the self-identity of things is best understood in his saying that one cannot step into the same river twice.

If that is true, there remains no possibility for knowledge. This self-identity of the objects of knowledge is grounded in the self-identity of the ego. A denial of the ego results in the denial of knowledge. Nietzsche wants to avoid this denial, for he assumes that knowledge is necessary for human survival.

Nietzsche, however denies the moral subject completely. For him, this moral subject was created after the suppression of human instincts. Nietzsche locates this break in the prehistoric times. Moral subject for Nietzsche is not acceptable, and should be contested.

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