Canadian Journal of Philosophy (2025), 55: 3, 289–297
doi:10.1017/can.2026.10052

SYMPOSIUM

The Practical Self, and Practical Experience. Critical Notice of *The Practical Self*, by Anil Gomes.

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Abstract
The problem at the center of Gomes' *The Practical Self* is how the self-conscious reflective subject can come understand herself, and establish, that she is in an objective world. Its proposed solution lies in practically, not theoretically, grounded assent, sustained by our conversation with others. This critical response to the book aims to do three things. First, to encourage people to read it. Second, to scrutinize Gome's own recommendation for the best route to take in dealing with this problem. Third, to ask whether there is a shorter route.

Keywords: Anil Gomes; *The Practical Self*; self-consciousness; objectivity; practical assent; practical experience

My colleague Rory Madden, who is thanked by Gomes in the acknowledgements at the end of the book, refers to *The Practical Self* as "Anil's lockdown book". When you think of a lockdown book, you think of inward gazing autobiography. But this is no Mystic Pizza, nor Bo Burnham's "Inside". There is a sense in which it is inward gazing—we start with "Isolation" (Chapter 1), only to move on to "Retreat" (Chapter 2). However, this is at the service of trying to work out how to get the world, and others, back. There is a sense in which it is intellectually autobiographical—like many good books in philosophy. Gomes is a student of Cassam, himself a student of Strawson, interpreter of Kant. This is a book in that tradition. However, it is also something of a rebellion. Lichtenberg, in "Lightening" (Chapter 3), presents more of a challenge than is acknowledged in that tradition. Murdoch, as much as Kant, is the hero of the second half when we get to "Faith" (Chapter 4) and "Practice" (Chapter 5).

As the economy of the chapter titles might indicate, *The Practical Self* is a compact book. It is also many facetted, dense in argument, and ambitious in purpose. It is not without its fault lines, but it is beautifully arranged and, astonishingly, given the difficulty of the topic, it is a pacey and pleasurable read.

In this critical notice, I want to do three things. First, to encourage people to read the book. It is a book that guides a reader through some of the deepest and most difficult terrains in philosophy with a sense of the tractable, the doable, and the enjoyable. Its problem is how the self-conscious reflective subject can come to understand herself, and establish that she is in an objective world. Its solution lies in practically, not theoretically, grounded assent, sustained by our conversation with others. Second, I want to scrutinize Gome's own recommendation for the best route to take in dealing with this problem. I want to try to get clear on what exactly that route is, and to raise some problems for it. Third, I want to ask—roughly—whether there is not a shorter route, a simpler path.

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1. Gomes' route

Human reflection can lead us to ask whether our capacity for thought gives us, in isolation, all that is needed for us to understand ourselves, and understand ourselves as elements of an objective world. Gomes is concerned to answer the question: "can the self-conscious reflective subject think her way to understanding herself, and establishing that she is in an objective world?"

The key notions of self-consciousness and objectivity can be understood in a variety of ways. Gomes clarifies that for him *self-consciousness* involves the exercise of the capacity for "recognizing some aspect of one's point of view as one's own" (p.11). And *objectivity* implies existence not constitutively dependent on the mind, or on some act of mind? (see p. 14–15).

Many philosophers will claim that if we seek self-understanding and an understanding of our relation to the objective world, then self-consciousness need not be our starting point. Descartes' retreat was not compulsory. They will, moreover, claim that if it must be our starting point, self-conscious reflection is not going to give us the objectivity. If it is compulsory, then we in trouble.

In a highly qualified way, Gomes' agrees with the thought that self-conscious reflection does not establish objectivity. He argues that there is no theoretical route available that will take us from self-consciousness to objectivity. We cannot experience or argue our way there. We can, however, argue that the conditions of our self-consciousness mean that we must "practically assent" to objectivity. The practical assent route that Gomes' offers could be seen as something of a skeptical solution to the problem, but that is not quite right. Unless one thought that faith-based belief in a deity, or in human goodness, constituted a skeptical solution. For Gomes, our commitment to objectivity, given our self-consciousness, is presented more like a matter of *required faith.*

What is Gomes's practical assent route from self-consciousness to objectivity? For Gomes, self-consciousness is sustained by a required practical commitment to being in an objective world with others. How and why? Roughly, because self-consciousness requires faith in oneself as the agent of one's thinking, and that faith in oneself as the agent of one's thinking is sustained by a social practice of holding, and being held accountable for, our judgements. The social practice of holding and being held accountable for our judgments relates us to an objective world of other people. Gomes' argument comes in two stages. First, he argues that we are required practically to assent to the claim that we are agents of our thinking. Second, he argues that our practical assent to the claim that we are agents of our thinking is sustained by practices that both presuppose that we are agents of our thinking and involve a commitment to objectivity.

Here is how I understand the first step of Gomes' argument, the argument for practical assent:

(1) Practical assent to any claim C is *required* iff C is theoretically undecidable, and C is a rational requirement on the pursuit of ends we are required to set.
(2) Self-conscious subjects are required to set the end of settling the question of the propriety of their perspective on the world.
(3) The claim that 'one is the agent of one's thinking' is a practical requirement of the pursuit of the end of settling the question of the propriety of one's perspective on the world.
(4) The claim that one is an agent of one's thinking is theoretically undecidable.
(5) So, Practical assent to the claim that one is the agent of one's thinking is required.

(1) is a spelling out of Kant's notion of practical assent and the conditions under which it is required. (2) is just an unpacking of what self-consciousness involves for Gomes. Why does he hold (3)? The argument for (3) is as follows:

(i) To set the end of settling the question of the propriety of one's perspective on the world is to take the end to be attainable.
(ii) To take the end of settling questions to be attainable requires that we are agents of our thinking.

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(iii) So, to set the end of settling the question of the propriety of their perspective on the world requires that we are agents of our thinking.

A significant part of *The Practical Self* is devoted to arguing for (4): that there is no experience or argument that establishes that one is the agent of one's thinking. Our being agents of our thinking is theoretically elusive for Gomes. We will come back to this. (5) gives us our conclusion that taking ourselves to be the agent of our thinking is a required practical postulate.

Once we have established the conclusion (5), that practical assent to the claim that one is the agent of one's thinking is required, how do we establish that our commitment to being the agents of our thinking gives us objectivity?

Here is how I understand the second stage of Gomes' argument, the argument for objectivity:

1. A practice, even if not a *necessary condition* of practical assent to C (p.141) sustains (scaffolds) practical assent to claim C, if it presupposes claim C.
2. The social practices of holding and being held accountable for one's thinking with others presuppose that "one is the agents of ones thinking".
3. So, the social practices of holding and being held accountable for one's thinking with others, even though *not necessary conditions* of practical assent to the claim that "one is the agent of ones thinking" (p.141) sustain (scaffold) practical assent to the claim "one is the agents of ones thinking."
4. The social practices of holding, and being held accountable for one"s thinking with others, which sustain (scaffold) our practical assent to the claim that one is the agent of one's thinking, involve a commitment to objectivity
5. So, practical assent to the claim that one is the agent of one's thinking is sustained (scaffolded) by a commitment to objectivity.

It will help, for what follows, if we have a short-hand version of the argument:

1. A practice can sustain practical assent to claim C if it presupposes C.
2. Holding to account practices presuppose the agent thinking claim.
3. So, holding to account practices sustain practical assent to the agent thinking claim.
4. Holding to account practices assume objectivity.
5. So, practical assent to the agent thinking claim is sustained by an assumption of objectivity.

The first thing to note in thinking about the force of these arguments, is that there are two kinds of agent thinking claim one might make: a general claim or an act specific claim. I may claim that I am, in general, an agent of my thought, that I have agential capacity in relation to my thinking, or I might claim that, right now, I am the agent of this thinking. Much of *The Practical Self*, with its focus on Descartes' *cogito*, and the nature of Lichtenburg's challenge to it, would lead one to think that the concern is primarily to build a route from an act—this act, right now—of self-conscious thinking to objectivity. However, the argument from practical assent and the argument for objectivity are arguments that give us only the general agent thinking claim. For me to get an argument from this very act of self-conscious thinking to objectivity, using the arguments above, I would need to be able to assume not only that, as per (2) "self-conscious subjects are required to set the end of settling the question of the propriety of their perspective on the world," but that I am right now settling the question of my propriety of my perspective on the world. Gomes' could assume that our theoretical understanding of self-consciousness will give us the former, but I would need more than such theoretical knowledge to use the argument to move from this act of thinking to objectivity: I would need to know that I am setting an end right now, and know how. Moreover, the account of how I know I am setting an end right now needs to fall short of an account of how I know that I am the agent of my thinking, if practical assent is required for the latter, but not the former. This raises the

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question of whether there is, for Gomes, an understanding of setting an end on which I can know that I am right now setting an end, but still be theoretically unwarranted in knowing that I am the agent of my thinking and therefore in need of practical assent? If so, we need to know what that understanding is.

This question leads to a second set of concerns with Gomes' route: how he thinks of the relation between the agent thinking claim and the starting points of his arguments, that concern "end setting," in the first argument, and "talking to others," in the second.

In relation to the practical assent argument, how we are to understand our capacity to "set an end." Why is an exercise of such a capacity not already an exercise of a capacity to be the agent of one's thinking? If I set an end, do I not, thereby, engage in an act of thinking as its agent? If that is right, then establishing that we set ends is no more nor less difficult than establishing the agent thinking claim. To be able to earn his starting point, in the context, Gomes would have to earn a non-agential notion of end setting.

In relation to the argument for objectivity, if we are not already entitled to claim that we are agents of our thinking, and that there, objectively, other people, why are we entitled to the starting claim that there are social practices that involve talking to others? In claiming that there are social practices that involve talking to others, are we not thereby already claiming that we are agents of our own thinking in an objective world? As I understand talking, in talking, we exercise our capacity for being agents who can think with words. Gomes' argument relies on the idea that the social practices of holding and being held accountable for one's thinking with others—that is, talking with others—assume sustained practical assent to one being the agent of ones thinking, because such practices presuppose that one is the agent of one's thinking. However, the relation seems more direct than that: "the social practices of holding and being held accountable for one's thinking with others" are constituted by acts of agential thinking, along with others.

Perhaps Gomes will argue that the arguments as I have set them out—in third personal descriptive form—do not capture a critical element of his envisaged starting point. The starting point is, instead, a certain kind of practical imperative understood first personally. In saying that "self-conscious subjects are required to set the end of settling the question of the propriety of their perspective on the world" he is not making a general claim about the nature of self-conscious subjects, knowable by the self-conscious subject, rather he is making a claim about a rational *imperative* that characterizes the self-conscious outlook: settle the question of the propriety of this, my, perspective! To obey that imperative—to settle the question—demands that the subject be an agent of her thinking. So, in obeying the imperative she is practically committed to the claim that she is the agent of her thinking—and given that she cannot establish the claim through theoretical resources, she must practically assent to it. She must have faith in it. On this understanding, the argument for practical assent to being the agent of one's thinking rather goes like this:

(1) *(Necessary Imperative)* Settle the question of the propriety of one's perspective —it is required!
(2) Practical assent to any claim C is *required* iff C is theoretically undecidable, and C is a rational requirement on the pursuit of ends we are required to set.
(3) The claim that one is an agent of one's thinking is theoretically undecidable.
(4) Being the agent of one's thinking is a practical requirement of settling the question of the propriety of one's perspective.
(5) So, *(Necessary Imperative)* Practically assent to the agent thinking claim—it is practically required by what is required!

There are two things to say about this version of the argument. One, is that we are still owed a story of how to understand the content, and necessity, of the imperative "Settle the question!" where it is not simply the practical demand to "Think!". In which case, the rational *imperative* that characterizes the self-conscious outlook immediately assumes—in being an imperative at all—that

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we have the power to be agents of our own thought. Our being agents of our thoughts is given in the applicability of the imperative. The route through settling questions is not needed.

Two, even if this strategy—that we do not need to assume that we are agents of thought as a premise, we need only to be governed by distinct necessary practical imperatives of self-consciousness—might work for the argument for practical assent, it will not work for the problems with the argument for objectivity.

Perhaps one must practically assent to the claim "one is the agent of one's thinking" because one must "settle the question". But one is not practically required to assent to the "Holding to account practices presuppose the agent thinking" claim. This is not a practical imperative—it is a theoretical claim about what is practically presupposed by those involved in holding to account practices. Moreover, Gomes makes it clear that he does not take the holding to account conversational practices, that sustain and scaffold practical assent to the claim that we are agents of our thinking, to be necessary. He says: "Something can be central for us, even if it is not strictly required…Practices are like this. They are not a necessary condition on practical assent. But they are central ways in which we can maintain our practical assent." (p.141).

This means that, in the case of the argument for objectivity, Gomes cannot avoid the problem I raised for his starting premises by suggesting that the first step of the argument is not something assumed to be true but is rather a practical imperative. The argument from objectivity rests on the idea that conversational holding to account practices presuppose the agent thinking claim, and involve a commitment to objectivity. Gomes cannot get away from the objection that, given that conversational holding to account practices are talking practices, and given that talking is an agent thinking activity, the premise "holding to account practices presuppose the agent thinking claim" already assumes that we are agents of our thinking. Nor can he get away from the objection that, given that talking with others involves a commitment to objectivity, we already assume that we are in an objective world. He cannot re-construe the argument in imperatival form, so that it essentially goes something like:

1. *(Necessary Imperative)* Engage in holding to account practices—it is required!
2. Holding to account practices pre-suppose one is the agent of one's thinking.
3. Holding to account practices assume objectivity.
4. So, *(Necessary Imperative)* Practically assent to the claim that one is the agent of one's thinking and to objectivity—it is pre-supposition and an assumption of practically required practice!

For Gomes, engaging in holding to account practices is *not* a required practical imperative inherent to self-consciousness. It is something we contingently do that sustains and scaffolds our practical assent to the claim that we are agents of our thinking. That means that for the objectivity argument to constitute a route that will take us out of isolation, we must already have some justification, from within the context of isolation, for holding that there are conversational holding to account practices that presuppose the agent thinking claim. However, to assume that, as I have suggested, the subject has to have already assumed that she is the agent of her thinking—in taking herself to be conversing—and assumed objectivity, in taking herself to be conversing with others. The only way to regain the kind of practical starting point afforded by the imperative, in the face of engagement in holding to account practices not being a requirement, would be to have as our starting point something like an expression of an intention, or practical knowledge: "Engaging in holding to account practices is the thing for me to do" or "I am engaged in holding to account practices". However, although such a starting point would be practical, it would presuppose the agent thinking claim and assume objectivity in assuming the existence of others.

This connects to a further question about my relation to the claim that I am the agent of my thinking. For Gomes, the practical postulate "I am the agent of my thinking" compares with the practical postulate of God's existence; they are both matters of practically required faith. But how

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does the practical postulate "I am the agent of my thinking" interact with the theoretical beliefs and judgments I make with respect to our own agency? The practical postulate of God's existence is compatible with a certain kind of theoretical skepticism. It is rational and consistent, within Gomes" framework, to say that I have faith in God's existence but that I neither judge nor believe that God exists. For the parallel to hold up, Gomes should allow that I can rationally express my faith that I am the agent of my thinking, but also declare myself to neither believe nor judge that I am the agent of my thinking. However, surely, we would doubt the rationality of agent who did that. I am not convinced that Gomes' himself thinks that a rational agent could express things in such a way. Consider the claim he makes when arguing that settling the question about the propriety of our perspective depends on our assenting to the claim that we are agents of our thinking. He says:

> Our understanding of ourselves as the agents of our thinking then, is built into our capacity for self-conscious deliberation…It is thus not underwritten in something distinct from and more basic than our agential capacities themselves. (p. 131.)

So, our capacity for self-conscious deliberation requires our understanding of ourselves as the agents of our thinking. If that is so—if our deliberations are the self-conscious exercises of our agency in thinking—how can we allow the claim that we are agents of our thinking to be mere practical postulates, capable of being held at a rational distance? If our claim that we are agents of our thinking is built into our capacity for self-conscious deliberation, then we have as much reason to doubt that we have any such capacity as to doubt that we are agents of our thinking. The connection between our capacity for self-conscious deliberation and the agent thinking claim seems more fittingly understood as a constitutive claim, knowable by the understanding in the exercise of deliberation. This thought is roughly the same as the one driving the question raised earlier as to whether Gomes' has an understanding of setting an end on which I can be setting the end, and I know I must, but be theoretically unwarranted in knowing that I am the agent of my thinking, and still in need of practical assent.

2. A simpler path?

Earlier on in the book, Gomes offers, in order to reject, what he calls the *Simple Argument*. The argument goes:

1. I am part of the objective world
2. Self-consciousness involves making a judgment about myself.
3. So, Self-consciousness involves being related to a part of the objective world.

Why does Gomes reject the simple argument? The simple argument demands arguments for 1. However, even if we assume 1, it may be that I am part of the objective world, but my status as objective plays no role in my self-consciousness, in my recognizing my perspective as my own. Here is how Gomes puts the matter:

> This is not to say that the Simple Argument is wrong. If I am an item in the objective world, and if I can think about myself, then thinking about myself relates me to something in the objective world. But absent some grounds for thinking that the subject of self-conscious judgment is identical to part of the objective world, any such argument will remain unsatisfactory to someone embarked upon the Cartesian project. (p.19)

Gomes thinks that for the Simple Argument to help, we would need a reason, *intelligible from within self-conscious thinking*, to think that the subject is identical to a part of the objective world. He also thinks that we do not have that. How might the intelligibility condition be met? And why does Gomes think that it cannot be?

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Gomes assumes that there are two ways in which one might meet the intelligibility condition, and to know that one is part of the objective world—through intellect or through sensible experience. He argues that neither delivers theoretical grounds for thinking that the self is part of the objective order.

He argues that reflection from the self-conscious perspective does not theoretically ground the necessary ways that we must think about ourselves. In particular, it does not enable us to establish that there is an objective world of which we are a part.

With respect to sensible experience, Gomes argues that even though self-consciousness might require ascription of experiences to an objective self, we do not experience that self in self-consciousness. Gomes argues that we are not acquainted with the self; it is experientially elusive. As Gomes understands it, the capacity for experience is a capacity for receptive sensibility, and receptive sensibility does not enable us to be acquainted with ourselves, both as ourselves, and as elements of the objective order in self-consciousness.

We might have thought that our capacity for bodily awareness is a capacity that enables us to be acquainted with ourselves in a distinctly first-person way, *and* as objects that are in the objective world, but Gomes argues that it is not. Bodily awareness does not, according to Gomes, meet the acquaintance condition on self-conscious thinking, and does not sensibly present ourselves to ourselves as something objective. Why not?

Gomes quotes approvingly Merleau Ponty's claim from the *Phenomenology of Perception* that "the object is only an object if it can be moved away and ultimately disappear from my visual field" (p.65). In his view, it suffices for an object to be presented as objective that it be presented as an object which can be occluded, or which can move out of perceptual accessibility to some degree, or altogether. However, "[b]odily awareness does not present us with a partial perspective on a realm" (p.66). It does not allow for a perceptual distancing from its object. Indeed, according to Gomes, it does not allow for that possibility precisely because "bodily awareness presents us with the body in such a way that there is no question whether I am the object which is being presented that it fails to present the body as something on which we have a partial perspective" (p.67.) So, he concludes "absent some other way of explaining what it is for a mode of sensory awareness to present its objects as objective" (p.67) bodily awareness should not be taken to present us with ourselves as objective.

Gomes' argument is not straightforward—just because partial perspectives in experience suffice for objectivity, it does not show that other features of experience may not. Indeed, given that bodily awareness is a form of perception dedicated to informing the perceiver of the spatial properties—location, orientation, movement—of only the perceiver herself, so that the perceiver cannot coherently withdraw from the object perceived, we might think that it shows that there *must* be features of experience other than partial perspectives that also suffice for objectivity. Rather than taking bodily awareness as failing to meet a partial perception on objectivity, we might think it shows any such condition to be misguided.

However, my main concern here is not to dispute Gomes' conclusion that bodily awareness, understood as a form of receptive sensibility, is not able to provide us with a form of experience that is sufficient to secure experience of ourselves, as ourselves, as elements of the objective order. My main concern is to ask whether there is not a more capacious view of experience on which Gomes might allow that we can have other kinds of experience of ourselves that secure acquaintance with ourselves as elements of the objective order.

Gomes' central question in the book comes down to this one: how can one reasonably claim that one is engaged in an act of thinking, rather than there being only a passive occurrence of thinking going on? He argues that we are not presented to ourselves as the agents of practical thinking, and the fact that we are agents of practical thinking is not theoretically given to us in understanding. Our assent to the claim that "we are agents of our thinking" can only be a matter of practical assent.

Even if we agree that *receptive sensible* experience does not present ourselves to ourselves as the agents of practical thinking, and does not present us to ourselves as elements of the objective world,

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are there not experiences of production, as well as reception? Do we not experience our agency, as well as experience our world, and bodies, receptively?

Gomes has, of course, seen me coming. He says, "those who think there is such a thing as agential awareness will not be moved by these considerations" (p. 94). But asks "can we really make sense of a form of experiential awareness" which is active and non-observational?." He answers "no" because:

> [T]here is a principled reason why experience falls short: *experience is a receptive capacity*, and our awareness of our spontaneous activity cannot itself be an instance of receptive knowledge. And it is there in Anscombe"s claim that our knowledge of what we are doing is always practical, and never speculative. Experience cannot be the explanation of our sense of ourselves as the agents of our thinking. (p. 95)

However, what principle exactly determines that experience must be receptive? Can we really not make sense of experiential awareness, which is active and non-observational?

Consider how even Anscombe herself describes matters:

> There is a real question: with what object is my consciousness of action, posture and movement…connected in such a fashion that that object must be standing up if I have the thought I am standing up and my thought is true? And there is an answer to that question: it is this object here…observation does not show me which body is the one. Nothing shows me that.

Here, Anscombe talks of my *consciousness* of action, posture, and movement… and its sufficiency for me to know "this object here" is the object standing up and so forth Such consciousness is not receptive, observational knowledge: nothing is *shown* to me. But it is not obvious that she would deny that such consciousness is experiential.

Consider Gomes' Lichtenbergian question applied to action more generally, and not only to agential thinking. Suppose I ask how I know that I am engaged in an act of walking, rather than sleepwalking, or involuntarily, spasmodically, moving my legs, or in some other way subject to a passive occurrence? Must the possibility of this question mean that I should apply the Lichtenbergian restriction to walking also. It is the case that "[o]ne should say it is walking, just as one says "it is lighting." To say *ambulo* is already too much as soon as one translates it as I am walking. To assume the I, to postulate it, is a practical requirement."

I want to say two things in response.

One, that we have experiential resources that enable us to push back against such a restriction. The experience of walking and involuntarily moving one's legs is just a very different experience, and when I am walking, I can say that I am walking, based on the experience I have of being the agent who is walking, and indeed of an agent in an objective world that stays my footfalls, and that I move through.

Two, that if we have a self-conscious experience of walking, we also, in fact, have the intellectual resources that enable us to push back against the adapted Lichtenbergian restriction. As Gassendi said about the cogito, in his replies to the Mediations "[Descartes] could have made the same inference from any one of [his] actions, since it is known by the natural light that whatever acts exists" (Gassendi, 1642 p. 86). Is not Gassendi right that it follows from understanding what walking is, that in self-consciously experiencing walking going on, I must know that I am the agent of the walking. Indeed, internal to the experience of walking going on is the experience of myself as an object in the objective world to be walked over by me.

It may be that this kind of practical experience—practical intuition, we might call it—grounds our knowledge in a way that is distinct from the way that receptive experience grounds our knowledge. But that way is not faith, and that way does not obviously move beyond the resources of experience or intellect.

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Gomes has not, in my view, done enough to convince one that his more circuitous route is a surer one, nor that there is not a simpler path that gives us more than faith. Sometimes, as with lockdown, it might help to go for a walk.

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Cite this article: O'Brien, L. 2025. *The Practical Self*, and Practical Experience. Critical Notice of *The Practical Self*, by Anil Gomes.. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 55: 289–297, doi:10.1017/can.2026.10052

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