

# Kant and the unity of self-consciousness

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## The unity

Kant posits a form of knowledge before experience, an *a priori* that can be further specified into categories or forms of knowing, through which one perceives the world. An important process is the dynamic in which fragmented experiences come into a harmonious whole, forming logic, relation, and significance in one's understanding. The act of one reflective of oneself gripped in the process of such experiential information gathering and differentiating, is what presumably makes one self-conscious. Kant calls the faculty in question the transcendental unity of apperception. Besides Kant's extensive construction of other aspects of the *a priori*, the unity of apperception seems to be the one overarching aspect that does the ultimate work of being conscious. I will be looking at how the unity of apperception plays a role in Kant's architectonic forms and structures, and how these forms and structures in turn can't be separated from this unity.

There are many terms Kant uses that are similar to the unity of apperception and suggest its function, like synthetic unity, or the organization of the manifold. The unity of apperception prioritizes the process of 'I think' as a single representation without putting more specific representations I think 'such and such' at the forefront. It is similar to Hume's laws of association (reproduction of knowledge), yet not the same since for Kant this process is original (production of knowledge). Thus it is a spontaneous and not a contrived faculty, giving oneself schemas of understanding:

'For it is an act of spontaneity of the faculty of representation; and since this faculty, to distinguish it from sensibility, must be entitled understanding, all combination—be we conscious of it or not, be it a combination of the manifold of intuition, empirical or non-empirical, or of various concepts—is an act of the understanding '(B130).

## Mediative synthesis

Because self-consciousness entails both theoretical and practical judgment, which Kant laid out in the two works we read, the unity of apperception is constantly mediating between an unconditioned ground and the conditioned ground. The unconditioned is an unlimited ground of all

conditions, a ground beyond normal human understanding, but an objective and arbitrator for reason and morality. The conditioned is the specific thinkings one forms from experience, from which one condition is related to other conditions and the whole has an internal sequential logic. The effect of the unconditioned is both a pre-formative necessity for reason to decide neutral and where one's practical judgment derives. The unity of apperception thus plays a role in bringing together the unconditioned and conditioned. In the theoretical (<Critique of Pure Reason>), it abstracts a totality of understanding by using imaginative receptivity, etc. out of experiences; in the practical (<Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals>), the categorical imperative echoes the unconditioned ground of moral force and reflects that into specific conditioned actions.

As the manifold puts the possibilities of worlds on the table, whether theoretical or practical, the unity of apperception helps to make a self-conscious decision from the unconditioned to a conditioned (which manifests in the world). Thus the unity of apperception is not just synthetic of the manifold but is mediative in the sense that reason brings the conditioned to the totality of understanding, and actions come from a causal influence to the temporally good.

### Non-identification

Kant spent a lot of his thesis on theoretical reason before he tried to reconcile practical reason with it. So before getting to the latter, one needs to consider the former. The new structure of reason—Kant's Copernican turn—makes its claims possible by taking a negative role, where the unity of apperception is used as a revolving axis that doesn't have an unmovable content. As a result, it reveals the illusions of dogmatisms, such as 'God', 'freedom', 'immortality of the soul', which ideas are made real by the positive use of theoretical reason. The positive use of theoretical reason uses inductions and take their conclusions as realities when these realities don't exist in the proven sense. The negative use of theoretical reason is on the other hand a deductive process that is aware of its impotence to make its analysis as beliefs or facts.

One can point to appearances in the world and claim that empirical evidence is valid, but cannot go a step further and say that it exists as a fundamental reality. The internal reality that many philosophers wanted to claim as true is for Kant a ‘thing-in-itself’, as much as it can certainly be thought, cannot be verified. Kant thinks one’s ideality is incompatible with the world of sensations, as the latter do not have reality in the absolute sense. As much as thought can be unlimited, and one can come up with hypotheses of the thing-in-itself, knowledge claims of these things are limited.

Because of that limitation, the theoretical ground is conducive to forming the unity of self-consciousness in two ways. First, the unity of apperception makes experience possible to oneself, so judgments can be safely made, e.g. there is a tree. Though the appearance is only a representation of the tree, the relation between that representation to an object (which existence cannot be verified) makes one conscious of that object of experience. There is not an empirical causality that can make one claim existence from that appearance, but a determination in one’s faculty of understanding of that appearance simply. A relation between oneself and the world is made without doubt or skepticism, and one is conscious of and confident of one’s determinative conclusions. Second, because one cannot claim the absolute reality of a thing-in-itself, this understanding creates reflection. Every appearance is transitory in the sense that one couldn’t point to an everlasting entity within, but it is precisely because of this that one wouldn’t confuse understanding with agreement or identification. Thus one is free from attaching oneself to a fixed conception or belief in the mind. The self is left vaster to be a spectator of one’s agency when necessary. Speaking of the unity of apperception on this score,

‘It is therefore entitled *objective*, and must be distinguished from the *subjective* unity of consciousness, which is a *determination of inner sense*—through which the manifold of intuition for such [objective] combination is empirically given’ (B139).

One is at once subjective and objective, but the subjective is only the first step to judgment. Self-consciousness, contrary to popular opinion, lies not in what one subjectively takes as valid—not in conceptual contents, but in the awareness of the process of ‘I think’—the coordination of intuition to concept, understanding to judgment, and the various modalities of derivatives in making sense of a manifold. Only the unity of apperception itself is, in Kant’s words, necessarily and universally valid. The contents of thinking are only empirical contingencies, but the awareness of the ‘I think’ actually pinpoints a living mind for oneself. To look at the inner mechanics specifically, the said coordination (or mediative synthesis) is a discursive understanding, bound by logical forms, and judgments can only be made based on conforming objects of experiences to these forms that Kant gives at the Table of judgments: universal/particular, affirmative/negative, categorical, and so on (A70/B95). These forms can be taken as subsets to the unity of apperception, thus it does with faculties of rules to form judgments.

To further illustrate non-identification to concepts, or disenchantment of subjective attachments, it would be good to look at Kant’s particular understanding of the thing-in-itself, and how it is different from previous philosophic understandings of the essence. There are two words ‘noumena’ and ‘phenomena’ (B309). The latter is empirical appearance. The former has a positive and a negative sense, both of which are insufficient for Kant to be valid. The positive noumena is an immaterial entity in the matter. It is rejected since it means what can only be thought of as a mental representation, like ‘soul’, or ‘God’, is immediately also existent an entity. This kind of intellectual intuition is too direct, without a corresponding category in forms of understanding to validate its reality. The positive noumena go beyond the realm where one’s cognition can recognize. Only the negative noumena are acceptable, but still in a limited sense. The Platonic notion of forms would fit this category as it entails a permanent reality for which the appearances are only the particular derivatives of that immutable essence. Though Kant and Plato would agree that there is no thing-in-itself or essence in the empirical substance, as it is claimed in the case of the positive noumena,

Kant differs by disowning the actual existence of immutable essences in a transcendental realm as well. He may still claim its effect as valid and think such hypotheses not in vain to reason's and morality's higher ends, but wouldn't believe in Plato's forms as being 'just there'. The unity of apperception, taken up by reason's original, unconditioned freedom, makes the coordination that conforms the manifold to one's logical forms of understanding. Reason takes no preconceptions except for these forms of judgment. So Platonic forms are to Kant as mental limitations. On the other hand, Kantian *a priori* means that the forms of judgment act as opponents within one's organism, not as a single entity existing independent of the embodied human.

Thus a defining character of Kant's theoretical reason is that it is free of taking conditioned, temporal contents as absolute and eternal, whether these are empirically related or transcendently related. Self-consciousness is thus also free as it navigates the manifold without making it a this or that. But the conflicts between 'this or that' are numerous in the world, which Kant calls antinomies, and he is in his examples mostly concerned with unsolvable metaphysical questions.

'If thetic be the name for anybody of dogmatic doctrines, antithetic may be taking as meaning, not dogmatic assertions of the opposite, but the conflict of the doctrines of seemingly dogmatic knowledge in which no one assertion can establish superiority over another' (A421).

For example, whether the world has a beginning or not, whether a composite thing in the world is made up of simple parts or not, whether there is free will or not, etc. Both sides can give extensive arguments of why itself is valid. The advantage of using theoretical reason to solve the antinomies is that it does not determine the outcome of a debate. It makes judgments, of course, but only in the non-absolute sense, that it can extend and furnish each side of an argument equally. The unity of apperception brings discursive understanding into concepts, while it retains a pure understanding in the field of inquiry, and makes deductions (not inductions) through logical categories. Theoretical reason does not concern itself with subjective understanding because the

latter lacks universality and stability while claiming absolute grounds to what cannot possibly be so. Later Kant would introduce practical reason into the mix to show that a morally purposive judgment can be made, besides theoretical reason's metaphysical wanderings, when concerning issues in the world.

The main contention in this section is that theoretical reason helps build understanding without the need for agreement or choice, and the growth for self-consciousness from this is a greater facility in seeing multiple sides to a question. The self is made free through the elimination of attachments to externally posited concepts and ideas, thus gains a way to filter ideas for knowledge.

## Time and Space

In the transcendental aesthetic, Kant talks about space and time as two a priori categories to map the world. Specifically, space represents external intuition (extension) while time inner intuition (depth). Though the usual way of putting these two categories together is by saying 'space and time' with space before time, I take that when it comes to self-consciousness, time comes before space as the fundament thing that makes up for a self-conscious unity, while space serves as a persistent reality in which a subjective self-awareness rests in.

'Inner sense, by means of which of the mind intuits itself or its inner state, yields indeed no intuition of the soul itself as an object; but there is nevertheless a determinate form [namely, time] in which alone the intuition of inner states is possible, and everything which belongs to inner determinations is therefore represented in relations of time' (A23).

Indeed, the determinate form in time is one's certainty that one exists. Not through the Cartesian 'I think so that I exist', but through 'I made sense of thinking in time so that I exist'. The subjective immersion of time is the only thing about the subjective self that is justified in relation to the objective. Time is the motor of self-awareness. Time is one's individually conditioned sense of how things come into experience. Though time as an original form is

unlimited, the way it actualizes as an *a priori* in limited humans is by a moment in time or at a single time, thus has no absolute reality. The absolute reality would be having different times that are simultaneous, but one can only claim to know a succession of a single thread of time. Time realizes in oneself as a single coherent unity, stretched continuously, and it invokes one's schematization, or provides the background for it. In other words, the categories and their schematization are alive because of time (being successive).

The ingenuity of the space-time relation is that space is the external condition to which time's subjective inner sense lays upon, and as long as one is aware of oneself in time, one is also aware of oneself in space. Space provides a steady reality that the flow of time (what is now, what came before, and what'll come after) is unable to provide. As time as a variable posits immediate awareness, space gives immediate accommodation corresponding to different categories. However, because time remains as the primary filter in which the synthesis begins, space as an outer sense cannot generate itself except through time and is thus always a form that can be simultaneously existent but not successively, meaning that unlike time it does not have a beginning and an end but is multifarious and situationally established. As both space and time are *a priori* forms, they are not a result of being affected by some sense object and do not represent anything in and of itself, but purely intuitions of one's organized system.

Thus the same conclusion can be drawn from space and time: since one's sense of space and time is evoked by the empirical world, yet without absolute transcendental reality, not only are the objects of the empirical world null when it comes to claiming their essences, the self is also null. Since time seems to be an exception as it is subjectively perceived, can the self be both objective and subjective at the same time? Kant presumes that the self is a system of reflective capabilities or 'logarithms' and what is 'subjective' also comes from that 'objectively universal and necessary' system, so the subjective perception of time is part of the system's objectivity. As long as one does not claim an absolute reality to time, the subjectivity doesn't have a real ground and is



thus safe to be allowed to function. One is conscious objectively of one's subjectivities precisely in order for realizing oneself as oneself (or, think of it as a self that is strongly subjective in terms of returning to a reflective ground of relative omniscience of its functionings).

### Practical purposiveness

Yet after dealing with limiting the knowledge claim field, and refraining the self from making thought reality, the unity of apperception also needs to present itself, not just with theoretical judgment, but also with judgment of actions. Kant argues that freedom would require that practical reason fits with moral goodness. In the preface of the groundwork, he writes about the aim of bringing practical reason and speculative (theoretical) reason together, for they are essentially the same in principle (4:391). Just like how the unity of apperception brings the manifold of inner sense into cohesive representations, it plays the same role in bringing the possibilities of one's preferences and inclinations about 'what to do' into the foci of the categorical imperative of 'what ought to be done'.

It may be seen that reason has a teleological nature for Kant: whether it is the *a priori* forms in one's inner state that gives light to logical assertions, or practical reason making decisions on what actions to take, reason indicates a determinate impetus. Thus what is more central than reason may be this inherent teleology in the self-consciousness, and not reason, which clothes these inherent causes. To be sure, reason delineates how far knowledge can go or what actions can be taken, but what motivates reason is another issue. In the Canon, Kant says,

'For it is these very laws that have led us, in virtue of their *inner* practical necessity, to the postulate of a self-sufficient cause, or of a wise Ruler of the world, in order that through such agency effect may be given to them' (A819/B847).

Thus when it comes to practical reason, where there must be a stretch of reason's ends into the world, the teleology behind reason shows itself more and more. Of course, there are both (for the most part) necessary and universal truth for knowledge claims, especially in the natural

sciences, e. g. gravity, and (for the most part) necessary and universal truth for maxims of actions, e. g. do not harm. But the practical, as in the above quote, emphasizes its foundation on a certain inner ‘practical necessity’, ‘self-sufficient cause’, ‘wise Ruler’, from which both the self has conscious agency and good actions are taken. In the theoretical, reason can simply imply unwavering objectivity—the cohesion and logic of representations and judgments; in the practical, because of morality’s involvement, reason must align itself with something else more evident, a certain instinctual force. The theoretical can be more at ease in claiming its freedom of perceptions, its regulative judgments, its not placing a bet on either assertion, but practical reason cannot escape its purposive landing to actions in the world.

To be sure, Kant stresses the importance of intentions and think they are more important than the actual consequences of an action, but these intentions nonetheless must be good intentions, so in the practical, a positive choice must still be made, unlike an only regulative (negative) judgment in the theoretical. The choice is guided by the influence of the unconditional ground and relating it to actions in a positive way. Even in the theoretical, the pre-existence of *a priori* for reason’s objectivity implies teleology, though not demonstrative enough since reason still takes the steering wheel. While with the practical, this teleology is completely evident, because one has to make and own one’s choices outwards—reason must be empowered by something else. Here it is not the ‘unity of apperception’ being a faculty for understanding, but the ‘categorical imperative’ as the distinctively Kantian name for that teleological force behind reason’s determinations in the world.

The ground for practical reason is illustrated in the Canon. Here Kant asks one to ‘take the idea’ of a supreme being as the driving axis of the unity of apperception. The said ontological perfection is to be taken as, what theoretical reason would say, a mere regulative principle, yet pragmatically effective for practical reason. The unconditioned ontological ground is perfect virtue, while happiness occurs in the conditioned world so that for perfect happiness to exist, it needs to be

aligned with perfect virtue. It is good to note that perfect happiness isn't a reward while perfect virtue a requirement, but again, both are guided by a certain natural inner purpose and fulfillment that in turn comprises of the conjoining of the two. Thus while theoretical reason can't take the idea of an unconditional ideal as more than its own unconditioned authority, practical reason can, because it functions with what that idea entails. The reality, not just knowledge, requires what knowledge cannot reach be taken to practical faith. Being Kantian means to not debate 'God', but to act as if according to a 'transcendental theology'.

Self-consciousness hits home from experiences with determinations of one's freedom, both in the theoretical and the practical sense. In the former, the freedom to not be attached to the idolization of identities or concepts. In the latter, freedom implies positive purposiveness, for our inclinations can be contingent enslavements and distractions from the inner determination of the categorical imperative—the *a priori* call toward the good. Thus the unity (of apperception) is grounded in freedom, for freedom makes the dwelling of maximum goodness possible. Thus the unity of apperception is not asking the self to become conscious in the usual sense, namely to be one's particular, unique entity, but to question the intentions and grounds for the form of that particular singularity, thus to ultimately become self-conscious on both a necessary and a universal plane.

#### Works Cited

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