

Kant, Fichte, and the Act of the I

This essay focuses on a question crucial to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and foundational to that of his disciple Johann Fichte, i.e., what can theoretical philosophy tell us about the existence and identity of the self? The I as the act of self-positing is the ground of Fichte's entire *Wissenschaftslehre* (best translated as "theory of scientific knowledge"), and the notion of self-consciousness presented therein seems to be motivated primarily by Kant's remarks on the transcendental unity of apperception in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, though clearly Fichte has in view the whole scope of Kant's treatment of human cognition of objects. In what follows I argue that Fichte's conception of the pure I is logically consistent with Kant's on three points: first, concerning the active nature of pure apperception; second, concerning the distinction between pure and empirical apperception; and third, concerning their skepticism of any positive conclusions about the noumenal content of the pure I. As to the relation of the pure I to its object, however, I argue that Kant affirms the conceptual priority of the former to the latter while Fichte denies it.

Kant's I

In the transcendental deduction, Kant distinguishes two varieties of apperception dissociable from one another in philosophical reflection, i.e. pure and empirical.¹ Each amounts to a kind of self, but Kant argues that conclusions applicable to one of these must not be uncritically applied to the other. In both editions of the first *Critique* Kant takes great care to identify exactly what sorts of claims philosophy may soundly make about the self on the basis of the fact that objects are cognized at all. What, then, are supposed to be the characteristics distinguishing the pure I from the empirical I? To

¹ Cf. A107.

begin to answer this question, it will be useful to sketch briefly Kant's argument for the necessary unity of transcendental apperception. Kant articulates the fundamental presupposition of his argument thus: "If every individual representation were entirely foreign to the other, as it were isolated and separated from it, then there would never arise anything like cognition, which is a whole of compared and connected representations."² Here Kant defines cognition as a whole the parts of which are representations – the parts are not merely *collected* in the whole, they are *ordered* therein. Since, however, representations amount to distinguishable *unities* of the manifold given in intuition, they must not only be ordered but also unified via a "synthesis of apprehension," without which no representation could be reproduced by the imagination – if there were no synthesis of apprehension, the mind would have no way of identifying any representation as self-identical, which it must do if it is to be able to distinguish different representations from one another.

Kant observes that not only does the mind make such differentiations, these distinctions also seem to take place in a rule-governed fashion. In cognition, the imagination reproduces representations with regularity, and without such regularity concepts could never arise, because according to Kant concepts amount to unities of the syntheses of particular representations – if representations were reproduced only randomly, there would be no unity in their synthesis fit to be grasped as a concept. Cognition requires such unities because "without consciousness that that which we think is the very same as what we thought a moment before, all reproduction in the series of representations would be in vain."³ This is to say that unless representations are ordered

² A 97 (trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: Cambridge University press, 1998).

³ A 103.

according to a rule, concepts cannot arise and the imagination would have no cognitive function. Since such a regularity is in fact present in human cognition, concepts do arise in thought. For Kant, it is just these concepts that make possible the cognition of objects as such: objects for consciousness must be thought as unities, and Kant argues that such unities are grounded on the recognitions of synthesized representations, i.e. on concepts. If the mind has no concepts, it can cognize no objects. If imagination does not reproduce representations according to rules, there can be no concepts. Without the synthesis of apprehension, representations are not distinguishable from one another and so could not possibly be reproduced at all. Thus the possibility of the existence of objects rests ultimately on the possibility of some enduring ground of this synthesis.

This enduring ground of the mind's consciousness of objects, according to Kant, must be transcendental, i.e. a condition for the possibility of experience that is not itself a feature of experience. He argues that in cognizing objects as such, the mind does so according to certain *a priori* rules that condition the intuitions apprehended by sense.⁴ For Kant, any such *a priori* imputation of a rule to experience is the mind's synthetic cognition of what *must* be the case, not simply of what *is*: for instance, no amount of mere appearances could impress upon the mind the notion that *if* something is embodied, then it *must* be extended in space; this rule must always already guide cognition universally and necessarily. "Every necessity," Kant declares, "has a transcendental condition as its ground."⁵ The enduring transcendental condition that grounds the possibility of rule-governed experience is transcendental apperception, i.e. the pure self.

⁴ A 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*

In the first edition of the first *Critique*, immediately after having demonstrated why the existence of any object must be grounded in transcendental apperception, Kant moves to distinguish this pure self from the empirical self with which it might quite easily be confused. Transcendental apperception is not any *particular* self-concept or personality, and in fact the latter could not in principle accomplish the epistemological work of the former: any individual self-concept can only be constructed by abstracting from experience – this is sense in which it is the empirical self – and while we may affirm that transcendental apperception *grounds* one’s self-concept (inasmuch as it grounds the existence of any concepts whatsoever), it is not to be *identified* with that self-concept. Kant holds that the empirical self is one concept among a host whose existence is founded upon the pure self, and because the latter is transcendental, we are not warranted in ascribing it any properties the notions of which have their ground in experience.

Perhaps less obvious than this distinction between the pure self and the empirical self is the precise sense in which transcendental apperception can be said to be a “self” or an “I” at all. Norman Kemp Smith maintains that “Kant’s Critical philosophy does not profess to prove that it is self-consciousness, or apperception, or a transcendental ego, or anything describable in kindred terms, which ultimately renders experience possible.”⁶ That the first *Critique* does not claim to demonstrate that apperception makes experience possible is less clear to me than it seems to be to Smith. It seems that in his explanation of the notion of transcendental apperception Kant means to elucidate the necessary conditions for the mind’s cognition of objects. Thus perhaps Smith means that given the conditionality of such a claim, we cannot with total accuracy say that Kant is necessarily arguing for the *existence* of transcendental apperception. It does seem, though, that Kant

⁶ *Ibid*, 261.

would have every reason accept the quite modest claim that the mind *does in fact* cognize objects, and insofar as he accepts this, it follows for him that transcendental apperception actually exists and makes objects possible. Smith may mean that transcendental apperception is not a *sufficient* condition for the existence of objects, and indeed, Kant admits that the spontaneous element of cognition is accompanied by a receptive one.⁷

However, another possible meaning of Smith's statement invites closer inspection: in concluding that transcendental apperception makes possible the experience of objects, Kant would have been unwarranted in positing the existence (even conditionally) of *a* transcendental self identical to the transcendental apperception he had just described. One might read Smith's statement as a precaution: take care not to ascribe the status of *thinghood* to transcendental apperception. Read in this sense, Smith seems to be pointing to a mistake easily made in attempting to understand the nature of transcendental apperception. Kant describes transcendental apperception as the "I think" that "must be able to accompany all my representations."⁸ Richard Aquila notes that "while the 'I think' expresses empirical knowledge for Kant, the term 'I' itself remains a mere 'thought', as yet provided with no determinate reference."⁹ The transcendental I is provided with no determinate reference precisely because it is not a determinate *thing* at all. Aquila goes on to say that "it would be perfectly appropriate for Kant to say that . . . my use of the 'I' can at most express the existence of *some* intelligent being,"¹⁰ and here we must be cautious in our interpretation, for it might be clearer to say that the pure I should at most express the *action* of self-consciousness (i.e. its cognition of itself) and *not*

⁷ Cf. A 97.

⁸ B 131.

⁹ "Personal Identity and Kant's 'Refutation of Idealism,'" *Kant Studien* 70 (1979), 148.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 149.

any sort of substance of the same. As Theodor Adorno notes, “When [Kant] says that the ‘I think’ accompanies all my representations, this contains something else, namely the idea of spontaneity or activity.”¹¹ Kant seems to hold that the notion of such activity amounts to the entirety of what can be predicated of the pure I in itself – since it is pure, it has no phenomenal content, and the very form of the pure I is just its cognizing activity.

What, then, is the relation between the transcendental I and the objects of experience? Specifically, does Kant hold that transcendental apperception is in any sense *prior* to objects of experience? The following statements from the first edition of the first *Critique* might lead one to believe that the pure I must exist *before* objects of experience come into existence:

There must be a condition that *precedes* all experience and makes the latter itself possible, which should make such a transcendental presupposition valid. Now no cognitions can occur in us, no connection and unity among them, without that unity of consciousness that *precedes* all data of the intuitions, and in relation to which all representation of objects is alone possible.¹²

In what sense does the unity of consciousness “precede” experience? Smith argues that the priority is merely *logical* (i.e. as it occurs in the context of the deduction presented by Kant) and that any existential priority apparent in Kant’s language is simply the residual product of his pre-critical, Wolffian notion of the soul.¹³ This interpretation (the first part of it, at least) seems well-founded: at no point in his deduction of the necessity of transcendental apperception for the cognition of objects would Kant have been warranted to assert that this pure apperception exists at any time *before* the objects it cognizes come into existence. Indeed, if the claim that the pure I is nothing other than its cognizing

¹¹ *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (1959)* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 89.

¹² A 107 (italics mine).

¹³ Cf. Smith, *op. cit.*, 260-261.

activity is accepted, Kant would have been inconsistent had he held to any such doctrine of existential (i.e. temporal) priority: the pure I exists only insofar as it actually cognizes an object.

Transcendental apperception seems also to be prior to experience in another sense: insofar as the *concept* of the pure I is not mixed with experience, it is dissociable from the latter in philosophical reflection as a *necessary* condition for the latter's possibility. As such, Kant holds that "we are conscious *a priori*" of this unity. Thus it seems that Kant holds the unity of consciousness to be *conceptually* prior to experience in just the same way that the pure productive imagination is conceptually prior to the understanding.¹⁴ The fact that transcendental apperception occupies a logically prior position in Kant's deduction of the possibility of objective experience is no accident of his presentation; it is because of its status as a concept of which the mind can be conscious *a priori* that it must also be logically prior in *any* transcendental deduction of the possibility of experience. I suspect that Smith has this conceptual priority in mind when he notes apperception's priority "in the development of the deduction," but the distinction between its conceptual priority and the consequent logical priority seems to be one worth explicating.

It should be made clear, however, that no *existential* priority follows from the fact that the pure I is conceptually and logically prior to objective experience. Kant argues that since humans have no ability to intuit the manifold without sensation, the synthesis of representations is a necessary condition for the unity of apperception. Because he holds that humans are capable only of *sensible* intuition (as opposed to what he calls "intellectual intuition"), the conceptual priority of the pure I cannot be any indication of

¹⁴ Cf. A 116.

its existential priority – the unity of consciousness and the existence of objects are in actuality mutually conditioning.

Fichte's I

From the first, Fichte's pronouncements on the *Wissenschaftslehre* seem at odds with Kant's conclusions as we have just stated them: in the 1797 "Second Introduction," Fichte remarks that "the *Wissenschaftslehre* sets out from an intellectual intuition, that of the absolute self-activity of the self."¹⁵ Above it was shown why Kant did not accept the possibility of intellectual intuition as a function of human cognition: all our intuitions are apprehended by means of the senses; there is no receptivity without sensibility.¹⁶ Fichte agrees and claims to be using the term "intellectual intuition" in a different sense than the one given in Kant's articulation of transcendental idealism. Fichte affirms that "the immediate consciousness of a nonsensuous entity," i.e. a thing-in-itself, is "a concept perfectly absurd." Rather, "the intellectual intuition alluded to in the *Wissenschaftslehre* refers, not to existence at all, but rather to action, and simply finds no mention in Kant (unless, perhaps, under the title of *pure apperception*)."¹⁷ Fichte goes on to explain his choice of the term "intellectual intuition," and while the choice may be at first off-putting to the Kantian, there is no inconsistency in his simply assigning a familiar phrase a different but familiar meaning. At all appearances, Fichte means for the Kantian to read Fichte's "intellectual intuition" as "pure apperception."

If one may say that the identification of pure apperception with an *act* of the mind is evident in Kant's first *Critique*, one should note that it leaps off of the pages of Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte holds that the first principle of human knowledge is an

¹⁵ Fichte, *op. cit.*, 44.

¹⁶ Cf. B 135.

¹⁷ Fichte, *op. cit.*, 45-46.

“*act* which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.”¹⁸ “I am” is, for Fichte, a *Tathandlung*: “I am” expresses the I’s act of *positing* itself. What is being posited in this act is nothing other than the existence of the pure I: Fichte claims that the I exists only insofar as the I posits itself as existing.¹⁹ Fichte’s account of the manner in which this act makes objective consciousness possible reflects the logical progression of Kant’s deduction of the categories: Fichte begins with intuition, moves to the productive power of imagination and then articulates the relation these two faculties bear to the understanding and the cognition of objective reality. “Imagination,” he states, “produces reality; but there *is* no reality therein; only through apprehension and conception in the understanding does its product becomes something real.”²⁰ Such an analysis reflects Kant’s contention that “the principle of the necessary unity of the pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination prior to apperception is thus the ground of the possibility of all cognition, especially that of experience . . . the unity of apperception in relation to the synthesis of the imagination is the understanding.”²¹ Both Fichte and Kant conceive of the imagination as producing material to be cognized by the understanding and in this way grounding the work of the understanding. It is in turn the understanding’s cognition of the products of imagination that makes possible the experience of objective reality.

It seems that the difference between Kant’s assessment of the unity of consciousness as expressible by the prefix “I think” and Fichte’s definition of the I as its own act of positing itself is primarily a difference not of content but of emphasis and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

²¹ A 118-119.

approach: whereas Kant is concerned to stress the limits on what could be justifiably predicated of the unity amounting to/resulting from the act expressed by “I think,” Fichte lays stress on the nature and existence of this unity *as* an act. A number of plausible reasons could be given for this difference, one being that Fichte might have taken Kant’s remarks on limiting predication to have been sufficiently emphatic while viewing his treatment of pure apperception *qua* act of consciousness as somewhat inchoate and thus ripe for further exposition. In any case, there seems to be no evident inconsistency between Fichte’s definition of the pure I as the act of self-position and Kant’s account of the activity of thought as being what is contained in the concept of pure apperception: Kant and Fichte seem to give the same blueprint for the possibility of experience as the result of the activity of the pure I.

As to the priority of pure apperception to object-consciousness, I have argued that Kant seems to hold to the conceptual and logical but not existential priority of the transcendental unity of apperception relative to objects of experience. Fichte’s treatment of this issue in the 1794 *Foundations* differs from that in the first *Critique* in its approach as well as its conclusion. Fichte agrees with Kant’s denial of the existential priority of the pure I to the existence of objects, and Fichte treats the real relation of each to the other as one of mutual limitation.²² Fichte of course denies the claim that objects preexist the pure I; he argues that such a thesis is unable to accomplish the goal of a philosophical exposition of consciousness. He is no less clear, however, in his denial of the existential priority of the I to objects; he argues that in order to identify the pure I as self-identical, consciousness must always already cognize the pure I as *opposed* to that which it *is not* – that is, consciousness must, in positing itself, posit that which is non-identical to the I, i.e.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 108ff.

the world of objects. “Every opposite,” he declares, “so far as it is so, is so absolutely, by virtue of an act of the I, and for no other reason. Opposition in general is posited absolutely by the I.”²³ In the act of self-positing, the pure I posits opposition *a priori*:

But *that* everything, wherein this X may be, is not that which presents, but an item to be presented, is something that no object can teach me; for merely in order to set up something as an *object*, I have to know this already; hence it must lie initially in myself, the presenter, in advance of any possible experience.²⁴

This statement seems to differ substantively from Kant’s treatment of the concept of the object: as we have noted, Kant claims that since human cognition has no faculty of intellectual intuition (in the sense of an immediate intuition of non-sensible content), the synthesis of representations is necessary for the unity of consciousness. Consider, however, that insofar as the manifold of representations is only cognizable empirically, this necessity can only be cognized by abstracting from experience – our understanding, according to Kant, “can only think and must seek the intuition in the senses.”²⁵ We may say that the unity of apperception is for Kant conceptually prior to the mind’s experience of objects just because the necessity of the synthesis of representations can only come about via abstraction from experience, while the unity of consciousness can be cognized *a priori*.

For Fichte, however, since the concept of the object necessarily inheres in the concept of the I, the concept of the not-I can *never* be abstracted from experience; it must be cognized *a priori* along with the concept of the pure I. Fichte comes to this conclusion, it seems, because his deductive strategy differs from Kant’s: Fichte does not introduce the impossibility of intellectual intuition (in the Kantian sense) as a consideration for why a synthesis of representations is necessary for the unity of

²³ *ibid.*, 103. I have here replaced Heath & Lachs’ translation of *ich* as “self” with the more accurate “I.”

²⁴ *ibid.*, 105.

²⁵ B 135.

consciousness. Instead, he starts from the premise that any identity is as such always already distinguished from that to which it is *non*-identical, and insofar as this is the case, although the pure I is *logically* prior to the not-I in Fichte's presentation, he does not hold it to be conceptually prior.

The systematic upshot of this difference between the philosophies of Kant and Fichte is perhaps unclear: Kant did not present his philosophy of the interaction of the unity of consciousness and objects of experience in the systematized fashion of Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*; the first *Critique* is less a deduction of theses about the nature of the interaction of I and not-I than it is a propaedeutic to metaphysics and the warranted assertion of synthetic *a priori* propositions. Fichte operates on the supposition that Kant accomplished the idealist turn but simply did not organize his principles systematically. The apparent difference in their conclusions concerning the conceptual priority of the pure I seems relevant to Fichte's work at least: had Fichte admitted the conceptual priority of the I relative to the not-I, the course of the 1794 presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* might have been plotted radically differently, since Fichte's philosophy of interdetermination would not have featured so prominently if indeed it would have appeared at all.