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Pierre Keller

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth *Critique*), Kant draws a famous but elusive distinction between transcendental and empirical apperception. He interprets the distinction between transcendental and empirical apperception as a distinction between transcendental and empirical self-consciousness. He argues that empirical self-consciousness is parasitic on transcendental self-consciousness, and that any empirical consciousness that has any cognitive relevance for us depends for its cognitive content on its potential relation to transcendental self-consciousness. These are strong, but, I want to argue, defensible claims once one understands the nature of transcendental self-consciousness, as it is understood by Kant.

The central aim of this book is to provide a new understanding of the notion of transcendental self-consciousness and show its implications for an understanding of experience. I develop and defend Kant's central thesis that self-consciousness puts demands on experience that make it possible for us to integrate our various experiences into a single comprehensive, objective, spatio-temporal point of view. My interpretation of his conception of self-consciousness as the capacity to abstract not only from what one happens to be experiencing, but also from one's own personal identity, while giving content to whatever one represents, shows how transcendental self-consciousness underwrites a general theory of objectivity and subjectivity at the same time.

The leading interpretations seem to be in broad agreement that Kant's notion of transcendental apperception is largely a disappointing failure. Perhaps the dominant tendency has been to dismiss his notion of transcendental self-consciousness as at best implausible and at worst incoherent. But even those interpreters who have been sympathetic to the notion of transcendental self-consciousness have endeavored to give it an anodyne interpretation that renders it largely irrelevant to a defense of objectivity or even subjectivity. By simply identifying transcendental

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self-consciousness with objective experience, those interpreters deprive transcendental self-consciousness of any substantive role in justifying the claim that our experience is at least sometimes objective, and make it difficult to understand how it could sometimes be merely subjective.

It is not surprising that interpreters have had their problems with transcendental self-consciousness, despite the fact that it is undeniably a central notion in Kant's philosophy. Part of the problem is that Kant's notion of transcendental self-consciousness requires a subject of self-consciousness that is somehow distinct from any subject that we can experience. The only kind of subject that we seem to be acquainted with in any sense is a subject that we can experience, an empirical subject, and so the notion of a non-empirical subject that we could become conscious of seems to be based on an illegitimate abstraction from actual experience.¹ And, even if one concedes that it might be possible to be conscious of a non-empirical subject of experience, it seems that the only way we have of making sense of such a subject is by thinking of it as a mere abstraction from actual experience, in which case it is difficult to see how it could support any substantive claims about what the nature of experience must be.

Skepticism about whether it is possible to be conscious of a subject of thought that is somehow distinguishable from the kind of subject that is knowable through experience leads interpreters to look to consciousness of personal identity as the only kind of consciousness of self that we have.² Commentators who have resisted the tendency to collapse transcendental self-consciousness into consciousness of personal identity have often gone to the other extreme of treating all self-consciousness as a consciousness of judgments that are objectively valid, thus denying that transcendental self-consciousness is a necessary condition for consciousness of one's subjective point of view.³ And even those commentators who have tried to conceive of transcendental self-consciousness as a necessary condition of empirical self-consciousness have not had much to say about how transcendental self-consciousness could be involved in empirical self-consciousness.⁴

I claim that Kant's notion of transcendental self-consciousness is more robust than it has generally been thought to be, but also more commonsensical than most commentators have allowed it to be. I argue that the key to a proper understanding of the thesis that our experience is subject to the demands of self-consciousness is a proper understanding of the fundamentally impersonal character of our representation of self. We have an impersonal or transpersonal representation of self which is

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expressed in our use of the expression “I” to refer to ourselves. When each of us refers to him- or herself by means of the expression “I,” each of us refers to him- or herself in a way that could, in principle, apply to any one of us. This is the basic, minimal, idea that Kant tries to express with his notion of transcendental self-consciousness.

I attribute to Kant and defend several further claims about transcendental self-consciousness that are very controversial. I claim that empirical or personal self-consciousness is parasitic on transcendental or impersonal self-consciousness. I argue that this amounts to the claim that we are only able to grasp our own individual identity by contrast with other possible lives that we might have led. Then I argue that our very ability to form concepts in general is based on our capacity for transcendental self-consciousness. This capacity for concept formation and use is displayed in judgments and inferences that themselves depend on our capacity for representing ourselves impersonally. I then go on to make the even stronger claim that the very notion of a representational content that has any cognitive relevance is parasitic on our ability to form an impersonal consciousness of self. Thus, even representations of the world and the self that are independent of thought, representations that Kant refers to as intuitions, have cognitive relevance for us only insofar as we are able to take them as potential candidates for I thoughts. This claim is the ultimate basis for the Kantian thesis that experience is only intelligible to us to the extent that it is a potential content of impersonal self-consciousness that is systematically linked to other potential contents. It is also the basis for his famous thesis that there are non-empirical conditions on all experience.

For Kant, non-empirical conditions on all experience are conditions under which a self-conscious being is able to represent itself in any arbitrary experience as the numerically identical point of view. This representation of the self-consciousness as a numerically identical point of view through different experiences connects different experiences together in a single possible representation. This representation of the self is the same regardless of the different standpoints within experience that the self-conscious individual might be occupying. In this way, the conditions governing the representation of the numerical identity of the self provide one with constraints on the way that any objective experience must be. And, insofar as these constraints also operate on one’s representation of one’s personal identity as constituted by a certain sequence of points of view within experience, they also provide the basis for an account of subjectivity.

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IMPERSONAL AND PERSONAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Personal self-consciousness involves an awareness of the distinction between me and my representations and other persons and their representations. In order for me to have some understanding of the distinction between me and my representations, and other persons and their representations, I must have some way of comparing and contrasting my identity as a person with a certain set of representations with that of other possible persons with their own distinctive sets of representations.⁵ In order to be able to compare and contrast my representations with those of other persons, I must be able to abstract from the particular identity, the particular set of beliefs and desires, that distinguishes me from other persons. For I must be able to represent what it would be like for me had I had a different set of representations than the ones that I actually ascribe to myself:

It is obvious that: if one wants to represent a thinking being, one must put oneself in its place, and place one's own subject under the object that one wants to consider (which is not the case in any other kind of investigation), and that we can only require an absolute unity of a subject for a thought because one could not otherwise say: I think (the manifold in a representation). (A 354)*

The fact that I am able to represent the point of view of another rational being does not mean that I am no longer the particular individual that I am. But it does mean that I represent myself and other persons in an impersonal manner. For, in representing what it might have been like for things to appear to me in the way that they appear to the other being to which I wish to attribute rationality, I represent myself as an arbitrary self-consciousness, that is, just one person among many possible other persons. But at the same time I am also able to represent myself as the particular individual who I happen to be. For it is only in this way that I can compare the representations that I might have had from the point of view of another rational being with the representations that I have from my own actual point of view.

If I come to have doubts about the states that I am ascribing to myself, or if someone else challenges me concerning my past, I will feel the need to consider the possibility that I might be mistaken in what states I think

*References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (henceforth *Critique*) will be to the pagination of the first and second editions of the *Critique* indicated by the letters A and B respectively. I follow the text edited by Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1930) except where otherwise noted. All other citations of Kant's work are based on the volume and page numbers of the critical edition published by the Prussian Academy of Sciences and later by the German Academy of Sciences (henceforth Ak.) (Berlin: de Gruyter: 1990–). Translations are mine throughout.

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belong to my own history and even in who I am. I can only do so to the extent that I am able to abstract from my actual personal identity, and evaluate the reasons for ascribing certain states to myself in a manner that would have weight for other persons as well. Thus, in order for each of us to understand what it is to be a person with beliefs, emotions, and desires, we must have an understanding of what it might have been like to have a different set of beliefs, emotions, and desires. The possibility of the point of view that we must take in order to go through these alternative sets of beliefs, emotions, and desires gives self-consciousness its transcendental dimension, that is, it makes self-consciousness a condition under which we can recognize an object that is distinct from our individual momentary representations of the world.

We can refer to the self that functions as a variable in self-consciousness as the transcendental self:

We presuppose nothing other than the simple and in itself completely empty of content representation: **I**; of which one cannot even say that it is a concept, but rather a mere consciousness, that accompanies all concepts. Through this I, or he, or it (the thing) that thinks nothing other than a transcendental subject = x is represented. This transcendental subject is known only through the thoughts that are its predicates. (A 345–346/B 404)

It might seem that the idea of a transcendental self commits one to a featureless *bearer* of experience. But the dummy sortal x that stands in for different individual constants would be misunderstood if taken to mean that when we represent ourselves by means of I thoughts we are then mere bare particulars, or egos bare of any properties that one could come to know through experience. The notion of a transpersonal and standpoint-neutral bearer of experience would be incoherent. In order to be able to represent something, it would have to have some kind of standpoint from which it represents things or at least some determinate set of capacities with which it represents, but, in order to be a transpersonal and standpoint-neutral subject, it would have to have no properties in particular.

Fortunately, Kant does not think of the subject of transcendental self-consciousness as a particular that has no particular properties, although he thinks that this is a view to which Descartes was attracted in trying to infer substantial properties of thinking beings in general from the conditions under which we ascribe thoughts. For Kant, transcendental self-consciousness is a representation of oneself that abstracts from what distinguishes one from other persons, not a representation of a bare particular:

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It means a something in general (transcendental subject) the representation of which must indeed be simple, precisely for this reason, since nothing is determined with respect to it, for certainly nothing simpler can be represented than the concept of a mere something. The simplicity of the representation of a subject is not therefore a cognition of the simplicity of the subject itself, for one has completely abstracted from its properties, when it is merely designated by the completely empty of content expression: I think (which I can apply to any thinking subject). (A 356)

While I represent myself in a simple way when I represent myself by the expression “I” or by means of the expression “I think,” and even represent other thinkers simply when I represent them as individuals that can potentially say of themselves “I think,” it would be a mistake to infer from this that the ego that is the bearer of such I thoughts must itself be a simple individual or bare particular.

IMPERSONAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND JUDGMENT

The kind of self-consciousness expressed by the statement “I think p,” where p is any proposition, is, for Kant, the basis for all use of concepts, judgments, and inferences. In using concepts, and making judgments and inferences, we commit ourselves to a representation of what we are representing by means of our concepts, judgments, or inferences that is not just true for our own individual point of view, but is also true for any arbitrary point of view. Kant refers to this notion of a representation that is a representation for any arbitrary point of view as a representation that belongs to “a consciousness in general” (*Bewußtsein überhaupt*), as opposed to a representation that belongs to one consciousness alone.

Now Kant does not wish to argue that there are representations that do not belong to the individual consciousness of distinct individuals. His claim is rather that we understand what we are representing when we are able to represent the content of representations that belong to our individual consciousness in a way that, in principle, is also accessible to other representers. The capacity to represent individual representations in this manner that is accessible to other representers is just what Kant regards as the capacity to use concepts. The capacity to use concepts is, in turn, exhibited in the ability to make judgments that have determinable truth value, and to draw inferences on the basis of those judgments that we can determine to be correct or incorrect.

In judgment, we may entertain the possibility that something is the case, but we also commit ourselves to the assumption that what we judge

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is or is not the case. This commitment expresses itself in a willingness to offer reasons for our belief that something is or is not thus and such. In taking on the obligation to offer reasons for what we judge to be the case, we acknowledge that judgment is governed by normative principles. These normative principles are based on the commitment to truth that one takes on when one makes a judgment. Normative principles provide procedures for distinguishing judgment that succeeds in articulating truth from judgment that is false. These procedures may be articulated in the form of rules governing the behavior of individuals. The norms governing representation express themselves in terms of rules concerning when to token a certain representation if we are to succeed in articulating some truth. Our competence in judgment is then measured against our ability to express truths by means of the judgments that we make.

Judgment actually presupposes both the kind of personal self-consciousness that Kant refers to as empirical apperception and the impersonal self-consciousness that he refers to as transcendental apperception. Judgment presupposes personal self-consciousness insofar as judgment involves an implicit or explicit commitment on the part of the person who forms the judgment that things are thus and such for him, her, or it. At the same time, judgment also presupposes an impersonal self-consciousness, for when one makes a judgment one makes an assertion to the effect that things are thus and such not only for one as the particular individual that one is, but that, in principle, things should be taken as thus and such by anyone.

At least some implicit consciousness of self is built into the normative commitment that a judger takes on for her-, him-, or itself. To judge is to place oneself in the space of reasons and thus to take on a commitment to offer reasons for what one judges to be the case. But this means that, in making a judgment, the judger implicitly takes her-, him-, or itself to be not just conforming to rules but also tacitly or overtly obeying rules. Kant links the capacity for obeying rules that we display in our ability to use concepts to pick out and characterize objects not only with our capacity for judgment, but also with our capacity for self-consciousness. To have an idea that an individual is obeying rather than merely conforming to norms of which s/he has no implicit or explicit understanding, we must regard her or his point of view as one that we might be able to occupy in obeying the rules that we do. This is just to attribute the capacity for self-consciousness to those creatures.

Bona fide norms must be principles that the individual can come to

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understand as the basis for his or her behavior, and they must be principles that the individual can come to see him- or herself as having chosen to be bound by in his or her behavior. Such capacity for choice is what Kant refers to as “spontaneity.” He regards it as a distinctive feature of rational and hence self-conscious beings. Such creatures are rational because they can assume responsibility for their own representations. It is this capacity to take responsibility that is the basis for their possession of full-fledged beliefs. To have full-fledged beliefs, one must be able to take something to be true. And, in order to be able to take something to be true, one must be able to form one’s belief in accordance with norms that licence one to take as true what one takes as true.

In forming a judgment, the individual is not merely stating a fact about the way that individual interprets matters, the individual is also making a claim that others ought to interpret things in the same way. The individual is thus committing him-, her-, or itself to the possibility of providing reasons for why he, she, or it has judged in that way rather than in another way. These reasons operate as norms governing the judgments in question. Norms are principles governing the responses of individuals that apply to individuals in different situations.

Now it has often been claimed that normativity could stop at the level of what a certain group or community takes to be true. While a view of normativity that stops at the group allows for a shared communal point of view relative to which individuals could be said to be right or wrong, it fails to address the implicit claim of the group or community to articulate standards that hold for them not because they are the ones that they do use but because those standards are the correct ones to adopt. A conflict of belief or values between different communities is only intelligible if the respective communities take themselves to be committed to something that is not merely true or of value for them. Even if these different communities see no way of establishing the validity of their own point of view to the satisfaction of the other point of view, they still must recognize the possibility of some encompassing perspective from which their own view, in principle, could be justified. Thus, the normative commitment to truth requires the possibility of an impersonal point of view, even if the point of view in question is not one that is ever actually held by any person or group of persons.

Generalizing the point, we may say that, in order for one to be able to recognize norms as norms governing one’s behavior, one must be able to recognize principles that transcend a particular point of view. These principles that transcend a particular point of view depend on one’s

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ability to recognize not only one's own point of view, but also the possibility of other points of view to which those norms apply. For this, one must have some understanding of what it would be like to be an individual with such a distinct point of view governed by norms. But, in order for one to be able to represent the possibility of another point of view that is subject to the same principles to which one's own point of view is subject, one must be able to abstract from what is distinctive about one's own point of view. One must be able to place oneself in thought or imagination in the position of another and reflect on what things would be like from that alternative standpoint.

The self-consciousness expressed by the proposition "I think" provides each of us with an impersonal or, rather, transpersonal perspective from which we are able to consider ourselves and others. The transpersonal perspective is just the way that we represent our own activities as particular individuals to the extent that those activities are constrained by norms that apply to absolutely all of us. These norms place us in the space of reasons. This is why Kant insists that our only grip on the notion of a rational being is through our ability to place ourselves in the position of another creature. We are able to do this through the abstract representation of self that we have in the self-consciousness expressed by the proposition "I think."

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

My task in this book is first to show how Kant understands the notion of transcendental self-consciousness. In the process, I distinguish his understanding of this notion from the understanding of it provided by other commentators. Then I develop the implications for an understanding of the general structure of experience that are inherent in the notion of transcendental self-consciousness. I focus on the role that transcendental self-consciousness has in connecting different spatial and temporal episodes together in a single experience. This experience is distinctive in that it is not the private experience of an individual, but, in principle, is accessible to absolutely all of us. To clarify Kant's conception of transcendental self-consciousness, I begin with a discussion of the texts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which Kant first articulates the notion of self-consciousness.

Kant introduces his distinction between empirical and non-empirical self-consciousness in the first edition of the Transcendental Deduction as a way of arguing for the claim that we have non-empirical concepts

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that may legitimately be applied to experience. In the A-Deduction, Kant tries to establish that all contents of experience depend for their very existence on the possibility of connecting them together in a representation of self that is neutral with respect to the different contents of experience. He argues that this is only possible to the extent to which such contents of experience are subject to rules that connect those representations together independently of experience. He refers to these rules governing the possibility of an impersonal representation of self as the categories of the pure understanding. The Transcendental Deduction is concerned with proving that such rules are bona fide rules in that they must actually apply to all experience. In proving that there are necessary and universally applicable rules governing experience, the Deduction also provides a defense of objectivity. For such rules allow us to form judgments about the objects of experience that must be true not just for me or you, but for anyone.

In the next chapter, I argue that the notion of transcendental apperception that is introduced in the A-Deduction is not to be understood as a representation of personal identity. Instead, it is to be understood as a condition under which it is possible for us to form concepts of objects. As such, it is a representation of self that is the same for all of us. I criticize contemporary interpretations of transcendental self-consciousness as a kind of a priori certainty of personal identity, and argue that Kant was not concerned with providing a direct response to Hume's worries about personal identity. Instead, Kant introduces his impersonal consciousness of self as a condition for the formation of concepts of experience. I argue that the success of this argument depends on conceiving of concept use and representation in general as representing the world in a way that is the same for all individuals and that is also inherently systematic.

We represent items against a background of other representations that give those representations their distinctive content. If representations are to belong together in an impersonal self-consciousness, they must be connectable according to rules that allow us to represent ourselves as having the same point of view irrespective of the differences in representational content that distinguish those representations from each other. These rules have a cognitive content that is the same for all of us under all circumstances because that cognitive content is determined by the inherently systematic and standpoint-neutral notion of functional role in judgment and inference.

A number of contemporary interpreters have understood Kant to be