

Self-Consciousness and Knowledge

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Kant argues that the unity of self-consciousness, that is, the unity in virtue of which representations so unified are mine, is the same as the objective unity of apperception, that is, the unity in virtue of which representations so unified relate to an object and are knowledge. On this identity – the identity of the unity of self-consciousness and the objective unity of apperception – rests the transcendental deduction of the categories. For, the objective unity of apperception is the unity thought in the category; as this unity is the same as the unity of self-consciousness, any representation, specifically any intuition, belonging to this latter unity as such is determined by the category.

In what follows, I shall sketch (doing more would exceed the available space) an account of the unity of self-consciousness that shows how it can play the role in the transcendental deduction that Kant assigns to it.¹ First I explain the notion of synthesis. Then I say why the unity of self-consciousness underlies any synthesis. Then I show why the unity of self-consciousness is nothing other than the unity of knowledge, which, in the case of theoretical knowledge, is the unity of what can be given in sensory intuition.

1 Synthesis

Kant begins the deduction of the objective validity of the categories with asserting that we cannot represent anything as combined in the object without first having combined it: “[...] wir [können] uns nichts, als im Objekt verbunden, vorstellen [...], ohne es vorher selbst verbunden zu haben” (KrV, B 130). The representation of combination, he says, is the only one that is not given by objects, but performed by the subject: “Unter allen Vorstellungen [ist] die Verbindung die einzige [...], die nicht durch Objekte gegeben, sondern nur vom Subjekte selbst verrichtet wer-

¹ A book that has been and continues to be of invaluable help to me in thinking about this issue is Kitcher, Patricia: *Kant's Thinker*. Oxford 2011.

den kann" (Ibid.). Kant calls a representation of combination "synthesis". So we know what Kant means by "synthesis", if we can reveal synthesis to be a spontaneous representation, which, on account of being spontaneous, is the only manner of representing combination.

Let there be A and B: things to be represented as combined. In order to represent A and B as combined I must represent A and must represent B, but this does not suffice. We may suppose that, furthermore, my representation of A and my representation of B bear a certain relation to each other, but again, I do not thereby represent A and B as combined. Let us further suppose that I am conscious of the fact that my representations of A and of B are related: through the exercise of a Lockean "internal sense", or some feeling, I am aware that my representation of A bears a certain relation to my representation of B. But while, thereby, I represent my representations of A and of B as combined, but I do not represent A and B as combined.

In order for me to represent A and B as combined, it is not enough that I represent A and represent B, nor that my representations of A and of B are related in a certain way, nor that I am conscious of their being related. Now, if we restrict ourselves to the character of representations that can be explained by appeal to effects of objects on a receptive faculty, this is all we have: appealing to an object's affecting my sensibility, we can explain that I represent A and represent B; appealing to a suitable relation of A and B, we can explain that my representations of A and of B exhibit a corresponding relation; appealing to this relation between my representations (which we trace to the effect of objects on my senses), we can explain that I am aware of this relation. None of this constitutes my representing A and B as combined. If we confine ourselves to acts of a merely receptive power, we encounter no representation of combination.

In order to represent A and B as combined, I must represent A and must represent B, but this is not enough. A representation of A and a representation of B do not make a representation of A and B as combined, unless A and B are brought together in one representation. There must be one act of representing A and B. Moreover, the complexity of the object of this representation, which we register by saying that it represents A and B, must not be attributed merely from the outside; the representation itself must be a consciousness of its own complexity. A representation of combination is conscious of itself as complex.

A representation of A and B as combined is a representation of A and B that is conscious of itself as containing a representation of A and one of B. We may put this by saying that the relevant representation of A and B

holds together the representations of A and of B. Holding together the representations of A and of B is representing A and is representing B, and is representing both in one act of consciousness, this act being the holding together. Kant's word for holding together is "synthesis". Representing combination is holding together representations; representation of combination is synthesis.

We saw that, in order for there to be a representation of A and B as combined, it is not enough that the representations of A and of B bear a certain relation to each other, nor that, in addition, there is consciousness of their relation. Now we see what is missing. In order for there to be a representation of combination, there must indeed be a unity of representations, and there must be a consciousness of this unity. But this unity and that consciousness must be of a special sort. As I hold together the representations of A and of B, there is a unity of these representations, a unity that consists in their being held together. And there is a consciousness of this unity, for my holding together these representations is an act of consciousness. So there is unity of representations and consciousness of this unity. However, the unity in question is special in that it is nothing other than the consciousness of this unity. And the consciousness of unity is special in that it is nothing other than the unity of which it is conscious. For, the unity of representations consists in their being held together; and their being held together is my holding them together, which is an act of consciousness. So a representation of A and B as combined is a unity of representations of A and of B, which is nothing other than a consciousness of this unity of representations. So a synthesis is three things. First, it is a representation of a synthetic unity whose elements are A and B. This unity – the unity of A and B – is not identical with this representation of it: A and B may be one without being represented as one. Secondly, a representation of A and B as combined is itself a unity, a unity of the representations of A and of B. Thirdly, this unity – the unity of the representations of A and of B – is nothing other than a consciousness – and that is, a representation – of this unity of representations. A representation of unity of A and B is a unity of the representations of A and of B, which is a representation of this unity of representations.

As these abstract formulations may be hard to take, let us consider examples of contrasting synthesis with other relations among representations. Quine defines a mode of behavior that he calls "observation sentence": an observation sentence is correlated with two ranges of stimulation: it is affirmed when a stimulus within the one range is suffered and

denied when a stimulus within the other range is suffered. An observation sentence expresses a merely receptive representation: one that can be explained by appeal to the effects of objects on the senses. Now suppose there are two observation sentences, φ and ϕ . When a subject's sensibility is suitably affected, she may utter φ and utter ϕ . Evidently, this does not constitute a representation of anything as combined. We may add to the subject's repertoire of observation sentences a sentence " φ and ϕ ", whose positive stimulation range is the intersection of the ranges of φ and of ϕ . Here, the structure in our notation of the sentence reflects no structure in the consciousness it serves to express. The complexity is attributed from the outside. As Quine emphasizes, observation sentences, as such, bear no structure.

Quine gives as examples of observation sentences "rabbit" and "white".² As the corresponding stimuli may occur together, a subject may utter both "white" and "rabbit". Indeed, she may acquire a compound observation sentence "white rabbit". The observation sentence "white rabbit" differs from the predication "white rabbit" in this way: she who predicates white of a rabbit *holds together* the representations of rabbit and of white. The complexity is not attributed from the outside; it reflects a complexity of the representation of which the subject is conscious, not in a further act, but in this very representation.

Predication is synthesis. So is inference. Clearly, the idea of two judgments giving rise to a third is not yet the idea of an inference. The conclusion of an inference not only comes from the judgments that are its premises; it is conscious of itself as resting on the premises. Indeed, this consciousness, the recognition of the conclusion as justified by the premises, is nothing other than the drawing of the conclusion. So an inference is a unity of judgments that does not obtain independently of the subject's consciousness of it and of which she might become conscious in a further act. The unity of judgments in an inference is a unity that resides in consciousness of this unity. Inference is synthesis.

Representation of combination, synthesis, is a consciousness of unity that is the unity of which it is a consciousness. This shows why synthesis is no act of a receptive power. A receptive representation depends on what it represents; its object exists independently of being represented. By contrast, a synthesis is a unity of representations that does not exist independ-

2 Quine believes that human beings use observation sentences, and that the English words "rabbit" and "white" may be used by speakers of English as observation sentences. In truth, no human being ever uses an observation sentence.

ently of being represented. This unity of representations is nothing other than the consciousness of this unity. It follows that this consciousness of unity is an act of the spontaneous power of representation.

2 Self-consciousness as the principle of synthesis

A synthesis – a holding together of representations of A and of B – is a representation of unity – of the synthetic unity of A and B. Analyzing the constituents of a synthesis, we recognize that a synthesis adds to a manifold – to the representations of A and of B – a representation of unity, that is, a representation of a manner in which things may hang together, thus representing A and B as hanging together in this manner. The representation of unity, which in a synthesis is added to a manifold, is the rule of the synthesis. We must distinguish, then, the generic representation of unity from the representation of a specific synthetic unity: the representation of a specific synthetic unity includes in addition to the generic representation of unity a manifold of representations.

We saw that a representation of combination cannot be explained completely by effects of objects on a receptive faculty. When we inquire what sets a synthesis apart from representations that can be explained by receptivity alone, we realize that it is the generic representation of unity that a synthesis contains as its principle. It is specifically this representation whose source cannot be the receptive faculty; it must be a spontaneous representation, a representation that the representational power brings forth from itself.

Having brought out that the representation of combination is synthesis, Kant goes on to say that it is easy to observe that the act of synthesis is originally a single one. “Man wird leicht gewahr, daß diese Handlung [die Verstandeshandlung der Synthesis; SR] ursprünglich einig [...] sein müsse” (KrV, B 130). Clearly, the act of synthesis is not a single one with regard to the manifold that is held together in a representation of synthetic unity; there are many such representations, many acts of synthesis. Synthesis is originally one act in that the *generic* representation of unity is one. Synthesis is originally one in the sense that its origin is one, an origin contained in any synthesis: the one and only generic representation of unity. Kant says that it is easy to observe that there is one single generic representation of unity; it is the representation, not of this or that unity, but of unity itself. That is easy to observe considering that the representation of combination is not given by objects, but spontane-

ous. As a spontaneous act, the generic representation of unity can have no determination that cannot be traced to the power of which it is an act. Its determination exhausts itself in the fact that it is an act of this power. Therefore, if the power is one, so is this act. If a power is the source of a manifold of acts, this reflects the fact that its exercise depends on conditions not provided by the power. The generic representation of unity depends on no such conditions; hence, there is but one such representation. Indeed, we can identify the spontaneous power with this act.³

Having laid it down that there is one single representation of unity, Kant identifies self-consciousness, the unity of self-consciousness, as this representation: self-consciousness is the original representation of unity, the representation of unity itself. It is easy to see that self-consciousness is the representation of unity. For, synthesis is a unity of representations that is nothing other than a consciousness of this unity. And this defines *self-consciousness*: self-consciousness is a consciousness of unity that is nothing other than this unity. Any synthesis, any representation of combination, contains self-consciousness as the original representation of unity, the representation of unity itself.

Kant draws a further conclusion. He asserts that any representation that can figure in synthesis at all belongs to the unity of self-consciousness; any representation that can stand together with others in one consciousness contains the one and only generic representation of unity, the unity of self-consciousness. The generic representation of unity is not only contained in any synthesis; *it is contained in any possible element of synthesis*. If this is right, then there is a prior determination of any representation that may figure in synthesis by the unity of self-consciousness; prior to any specific representation of synthetic unity, any possible element of such a representation is determined by the generic representation

3 As Kant does in the following paragraph (KrV, B 134 fn.), saying that the unity of apperception *is* the understanding. – There is one single generic representation of unity, which underlies any synthesis, any representation of synthetic unity, as the ground of its possibility. This shows, as Kant goes on to argue, that this representation is not the category of unity. This category represents a certain manner of conjoining concepts in a judgment, distinguished from others. The representation of unity in question, by contrast, is one that underlies any synthesis, a fortiori any synthesis of concepts and thus all categories. The generic representation of unity may yet be – indeed it will turn out to be – *the category*. The justification for speaking of the category, as Kant often does, resides in the fact that there is but one original act of thinking all the categories, which act is the unity self-consciousness.

of unity which underlies any such specific representation of unity. The prior determination by the unity of self-consciousness of any possible element of synthesis may be called the original synthesis, and thus the unity of self-consciousness, an original-synthetic unity.

This assertion rests on the following thought: a synthesis of given representations is possible only if these representations already contain the generic representation of unity that is the principle of this synthesis; a representation can figure in synthesis only if the generic representation that underlies this synthesis enters into the constitution of this representation. Given that there is but one generic representation that underlies any synthesis whatsoever, it follows that any representation, insofar as it can figure in synthesis, depends for its possibility on this one original representation.

Again it will help to consider examples. A judgment is a synthesis of concepts. A concept does not contain any specific synthesis of concepts. Any such synthesis is a separate act from the concept; it is a judgment of which the concept is an element, alongside others. However, any concept contains the generic representation of unity that is the principle of its synthesis with other concepts. This generic representation is the form of judgment. For example, the concept white contains a form of predication according to which it is said of a substance as its quality. Therefore concepts bear a necessary relation to the form of judgment; the form of judgment underlies any concept as the ground of its possibility. So, while a concept is not itself its synthesis with other concepts, it presupposes the possibility of this synthesis. The possibility of synthesis is contained in its own possibility. Hence, all concepts are a priori determined by the form of judgment; this determination is an original synthesis of all concepts, original in that it is the origin of any concept.⁴ In the same way, a judgment does not contain any specific synthesis of judgments. Any such synthesis is a separate act from the judgment, an inference in which it figures as an element alongside others. However, any judgment contains the generic representation of unity which underlies any synthesis in which it may figure. This generic representation is the form of infer-

4 By contrast, a representation that does not contain the form of judgment can never be an element of a judgment. No amount of mental activity can make a judgment out of elements that do not contain the form of judgment. For example, no judgment will ever arise from concatenating or imposing any order upon observation sentences.

ence. Any judgment contains the form of inference; this form underlies any judgment as the ground of its possibility.

The dependence of any concept on the form of judgment, and of any judgment on the form of inference, have been observed through the ages; by Plato in the *Sophists*, by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*, by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. However, it belongs to Kant to have expressed the underlying insight with perfect generality. What Plato and Aristotle and Wittgenstein see is a manifestation of the fact that judgment and inference are syntheses and contain the unity of self-consciousness. Let us consider the matter on the level of generality of Kant's reflections.

If the representation of A and of B did not already contain the generic consciousness of the unity that is the principle of their synthesis, then representing this unity would be a separate act from representing A and from representing B. And then there could be no act of representing A and B, which, being conscious of its own complexity, is at the same time a representing of A and a representing of B. Rather, there would be three acts, representing A, representing B, and representing the generic unity, and no consciousness in which they come together, or else there would be representing A, representing B, and, as a third act distinct from the first two, representing A and B, in which case the complexity of the object of the last act were attributed to it only from the outside. There can be a representation of A and B as combined, that is, a representation that is of A and B in such a way as to be conscious of its own complexity, only if the representation of A as well as the representation of B already contain the generic representation of unity that governs their synthesis.

3 Self-consciousness and knowledge

Judgment and inference are acts of synthesis. As knowledge is judgment and inference, it follows that knowledge is synthesis. Now we shall advance a general consideration that shows why knowledge is synthesis; indeed, it shows that synthesis is nothing other than knowledge. If synthesis is knowledge, then the necessary relation of intuition to the unity of self-consciousness, which is the principle of any synthesis, will be its necessary relation to the unity thought in the category, which is the principle of any representation of an object of knowledge. This is why Kant, in sections 17 through 19, seeks to identify self-consciousness with knowledge: this identity underwrites the transition from the original relation of intu-

ition to self-consciousness to the a priori determination of sensibility by the category.

Knowledge, Kant explains, consists in a relation of given representations to the object. “Verstand ist, allgemein zu reden, das Vermögen der Erkenntnisse. Diese bestehen in der bestimmten Beziehung gegebener Vorstellungen auf ein Objekt” (KrV, B 137). In knowledge, representations are represented as of an object. We may put this by saying that knowledge is not only consciousness of objects, but consciousness of objects as objects. As we shall see, this may serve as a definition of knowledge, for the formal character of knowledge can be derived from this formula.

The formula – knowledge is consciousness of objects as objects – applies to theoretical and practical knowledge.⁵ We see this when we disambiguate the term “object”. In its most general use, “object” signifies whatever is represented in a representation. Distinguishing orrectic from cognitive representation, we may use “object” to signify the object (first use) of cognition, in distinction to “end”, which is the object (first use) of desire. An object in this second sense is a given object, in distinction to an object of desire, which is an object to be produced. St Thomas observes that rational desire is distinguished from merely sensory desire by being not only consciousness of an end, but consciousness of an end as end. Thus there are two forms of consciousness of objects as objects: consciousness of ends as ends and consciousness of given objects as given objects. These are theoretical and practical knowledge.

Let us consider what our formula – consciousness of objects as objects – implies about knowledge and its object. The concept of an object is a formal concept. The formal concept of the object of a power is a concept that represents this object solely insofar as it is an object of this power; the formal object of a power is its object considered solely through its formal concept.⁶ For example, the formal object of nutrition is food: what is bound up in an act of nutrition, considered solely as the object of such an act, is food. The formal object of sight is color, the formal object of hearing, sound. The concept of a power and the formal concept of its object

5 A source of the ideas presented here as they apply to practical knowledge, which pervades the text, is Engstrom, Stephen: *The Form of Practical Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA 2009.

6 Instead of saying that the formal concept of an object of a power represents the formal object of this power, we may also say that it represents the form of an object of the relevant power, which is the character it exhibits as an object of this power.

are two sides of a coin. The concept of a power represents a unity of an indefinite manifold of acts, acts of this power. These differ from each other on account of relating to different objects. Therefore, a representation of the unity of these objects – the formal concept – at the same time represents the unity of these acts.

Knowledge represents objects as objects. We can now put this as follows: knowledge represents objects through their formal concept. Rational desire, representing ends as ends, represents its object (first use) through the formal concept of its object: the formal concept of an end is contained in any rational desire. Analogously, judgment, representing given objects as given objects, represents objects through their formal concept: the formal concept of a given object is contained in any judgment.

It follows that the formal concept of a power of knowledge is a spontaneous act. Our reflections so far may have obscured this. St Thomas's wording, which we followed, may suggest that, when we define rational desire as consciousness of an end as end, we deploy a generic concept of desire – one that does not determine the desire as either rational or sensory – and a generic concept of an end, and think of rational desire as desiring through this generic concept. This would mean that rational desire has the generic character of desire, and is distinguished from sensory desire by representing itself as having this character, a character that it has anyway, independently of the fact that it represents itself as having it. But this is false. Rational desire is distinguished *as desire*; the formal concept through which it desires is not the generic concept of an end, but that of a rational end. For, nothing is an object of rational desire unless the consciousness of it is a consciousness of its form as an object of rational desire. Nor is there any act of the power that is not an application of the concept of this power. Hence, it is not the case that an object of rational desire has a form, as it were, anyway, from which a consciousness of this form could derive. Nor is there a nature of the power of rational desire, as it were, anyway, from which the concept of this power could derive. Rather, the power is nothing other than the concept of the power, the form of an object of this power, nothing other than the concept of this form. Rational desire is not constituted as a power of desire, on that account meriting to be thought through a generic concept of desire. Rather, the power of rational desire constitutes itself in the concept of itself, which thus is an act of spontaneity. Equivalently, an object of rational desire is not constituted as an end, on that account meriting to be thought

through the concept of an end. An object of rational desire is constituted as such through its representation as a rational end.

The character of a power of knowledge as self-constituted in its concept and of its object as constituted in respect of its form by its concept gives rise to a twofold universality, a universality in respect of the subject and in respect of the object. First, an act of knowledge is conscious of itself as an act of the power of which it is an act: a judgment is conscious of itself as a judgment, a rational desire is conscious of itself as a rational desire. This entails that a power of knowledge cannot be determined to act by something other. If the power were determined to act by an external cause, then the consciousness of its act as a judgment could not be identical with this act, but would have to be a second act of consciousness, which would relate the power to its determining cause. So a judgment not only refers itself to the power of which it is an act. It is conscious of this power as its sufficient ground. Any judgment says: the power of judgment judges, the judger judges, judgment judges.⁷ *Mutatis mutandis* for rational desire.

Secondly, an act of knowledge represents its object as agreeing with any other object of knowledge according to laws. A power of knowledge not only relates to an indefinite manifold of possible objects. A power of knowledge represents any of its objects through its formal concept, and this is, through a representation of the unity of this manifold. Thus the first mark of an object of rational desire, which sets it apart from the object of sensory desire, is this: an object of rational desire, something good, is represented only through a representation of a unity of all objects of rational desire, a unity of anything good. Hence, the first formal mark of the good is that anything good is in agreement with anything good. A consciousness of this agreement is a consciousness of laws thought in the formal concept of a rational end. In the same way, the first mark of an object of judgment, which distinguishes it from an object of merely receptive representation, is this: an object of judgment can only be represented through a representation of a unity of all possible objects. Hence, the first formal mark of an object of knowledge is that any object is in agreement with any object. A consciousness of this agreement is a consciousness of laws thought in the formal concept of an object of knowl-

7 A judgment may rest on another judgment, namely in an inference. However, as we saw above, in an inference, the judgment that is the ground is represented as such in the very act of which it is the ground. A judgment's determining the power of judgment is the power determining itself.

edge. We may put this by saying that, in knowledge, the formal concept is legislative in relation to its objects.⁸

We said we can define knowledge by this formula: it is consciousness of objects as objects. For, consciousness of objects as objects is universal both in respect of its subject and in respect of its object. Defining knowledge as consciousness of objects as objects, we define knowledge by this universality. Let us consider how knowledge, so conceived, relates to self-consciousness.

A representation of a rational end contains a representation of a unity of all possible rational ends. This is not a representation of a specific synthetic unity. Such a unity is one of actual ends, and not all possible ends are actual. The representation of an end, in respect of its matter, depends on pleasure, wherefore it is impossible in principle to comprehend all possible ends in one consciousness. The representation of unity, which is the formal concept of a rational end, is a generic representation, which is the principle of any synthetic unity of actual ends. In the same way, a judgment representing an object represents a unity of all possible objects. Again, this is not a representation of a specific synthetic unity. A synthetic unity is a unity of objects represented as actual. And as the representation of objects as actual depends on intuition, it is impossible to comprise all such objects in one consciousness. The representation of unity, which is the formal concept of an object of judgment, is a generic representation, which is the principle of any synthetic unity of objects given in intuition.

Any consciousness of an object of knowledge contains a generic representation of the unity of all possible objects of knowledge. As intuition is the first consciousness of objects of theoretical knowledge, it follows that any intuition as such contains a generic representation of unity. On account of containing this generic representation in any of its acts, the power of intuition is a power of representing objects as objects and included in the power of knowledge. However, as this representation does not spring from sensibility but from the understanding, intuition owes its character as knowledge to the understanding.

Any intuition insofar as it represents an object of knowledge contains a generic representation of unity, which thus a priori determines any given object of knowledge. Furthermore, any intuition, insofar as it can be combined with others in one consciousness, contains a generic

8 Thus it transpires that the Copernican revolution is an appreciation of the fact that knowledge represents its object through its formal concept.

representation of unity that underlies any synthesis as its principle: the unity of self-consciousness. We may ask how the former representation of unity, the one contained in any intuition insofar as it gives an object of knowledge, relates to the latter representation of unity, the one contained in any intuition insofar as it can stand together with others in one consciousness. The answer is: they are the same. For, both are acts of pure spontaneity. And an act of pure spontaneity can have no material determination that might set it apart from other such acts. The source of any such material determination must be sought in the receptive power. And as all receptivity is excluded from the relevant representation of unity, it is not one representation of unity among others, but *the* representation of unity, the representation of unity itself. The unity of representations in virtue of which they can stand together in one universal self-consciousness is nothing other than the unity in virtue of which they are knowledge.

We come upon this same identity from the other side. Self-consciousness is a unity of representations, and a representation of this unity is contained in any representation that belongs to this unity. Hence this representation of unity, self-consciousness, represents a unity of all objects of all possible representation that can belong to this unity. This representation of a unity of any object of these representations is contained in all of those representations. This is to say that these representation, representations that can belong to the unity of self-consciousness, represent their object through its formal concept. It is to say that they represent objects as objects and are knowledge.

In theoretical knowledge, the formal concept of its object is legislative in respect of its object by determining a priori the power of sensibility. In rational desire, the formal concept of an object of desire can be legislative without determining receptive representations. As the representation of an end is the ground of the existence of its object, there is no need for an a priori determination of a receptive faculty to ensure the possibility of this representation of unity of objects. This explains why the self-consciousness of practical reason is itself knowledge (it is the moral law), while the self-consciousness of theoretical reason is merely the form of knowledge; it underlies theoretical knowledge as the principle of an a priori synthesis of what is given in intuition.

