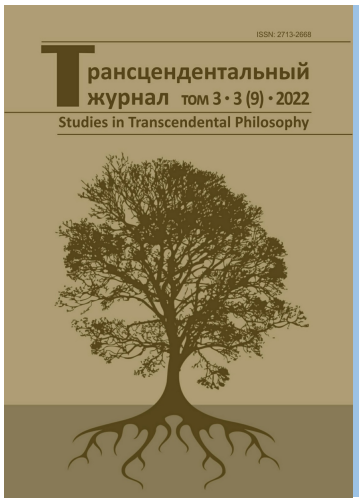

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“Relative” Spontaneity and Reason’s Self-Knowledge

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Abstract

Kant holds that the whole “higher faculty of knowledge” (‘reason’ or ‘understanding’ in a broad sense), is a spontaneous faculty. But what could this mean? It seems that it could either be a perfectly innocent claim or a very dangerous one. The innocent thought is that reason is spontaneous because it is not wholly passive, not just a slave to what bombards the senses. If so, then the rejection of Hume’s radical empiricism would suffice for Kant’s claim. But the dangerous thought is that reason, and the ‘I think’ which expresses it, is free, having the power to produce something entirely from itself. While this freedom is characteristic of practical reason, could it be characteristic of reason in general, even in its theoretical employment? Some contemporary interpreters have admirably defended the ‘dangerous’ conception by stripping it of the implication that it makes reason in general entirely self-sufficient. I attempt to add to this effort. However, what I contend is that this weightier conception of spontaneity (‘absolute’ or ‘non-relative’ spontaneity) requires abandoning a certain approach to the question that has been assumed by virtually everyone in the debate—namely, that the question can be answered by siding with either the so-called ‘metaphysical’ or the ‘epistemic’ interpreters of Kant. My goal is to suggest that the proper perspective on reason’s spontaneity resists such characterizations all together, and thereby resists any of the conditions under which it could be understood as ‘relative’ to anything.

Keywords list (en): reason, understanding, spontaneity, self-knowledge, transcendental freedom

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1

The Spontaneity of Critique

2 Kant holds that the whole "higher faculty of knowledge" ('reason' or 'understanding' in a broad sense), is a spontaneous faculty.[1] Readers of the *Critique of Pure Reason* will find the most common expression of this point in Kant's claim that the self-conscious act 'I think' is one of spontaneity (B133), and that this spontaneity is even "the reason that I call myself an intelligence" (B158n.). But what could this mean? It seems, at a first glance, that it could either be a perfectly innocent claim or a very dangerous one. The innocent thought is that reason is spontaneous because it is not wholly passive, not just a slave to what bombards the senses. If so, then the rejection of Hume's radical empiricism would suffice for Kant's claim. But the dangerous thought is that reason, and the 'I think' which expresses it, is *free*, having the power to produce something entirely from itself. While this freedom is characteristic of practical reason, could it be characteristic of reason in general, even in its theoretical employment?

3 This is what some consider to be the distinction between a merely 'relative' and an 'absolute' spontaneity. Because the radical sounding 'absolute' thesis seems opposed to one of Kant's most foundational claims—that knowledge is a cooperation of an active intellectual faculty and a receptive sensible faculty—most Kant interpreters will attribute to him the relative spontaneity thesis. But a few have challenged this approach, particularly in recent years. Indeed, not to suggest that reason may be self-sufficient—for this would indeed be incompatible with Kant's aims—but to suggest that reason must be something more than an active-passive hybrid of sorts if we are to understand what it is to have rational control of and to take responsibility for what we judge.[2] What follows will be an attempt to add to this effort. However, what I contend is that this weightier conception of spontaneity requires abandoning a certain approach to the question that has been assumed by virtually everyone in the debate—namely, that the question can be answered by siding with either the so-called 'metaphysical' or the 'epistemic' interpreters of Kant. My goal is to suggest that the proper perspective on reason's spontaneity resists such characterizations all together, and thereby resists any of the conditions under which it could be understood as 'relative' to anything.

4 Let us begin with a quick overview of this concept of spontaneity as it pertains to reason in the *Critique*. Kant's initial gloss is that spontaneity is a capacity's ability to bring forth representations from itself (A51/B75). The capacity of reason in a rational being is therefore spontaneous insofar as this capacity brings forth its own representations. A study of the *Critique* reveals that this notion of spontaneity both opens as well as closes the book. We already find traces of it in the Preface, especially where Kant indicates that the 'reason' which is the *subject* of critique is also the one who *performs* it (Axi-xii). This theme returns in the Doctrine of Method: "Reason must subject itself to critique in all its undertakings, and cannot restrict the freedom of critique through any prohibition […] *The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom*, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens […]" (A738-39/B766-67, emphasis added).

5 Kant calls this self-adjudication of reason *self-knowledge* (*Selbsterkenntnis*), and it is within this framework of reason's self-knowledge that the entire *Critique* plays out, including the elaboration of the sensible conditions required for theoretical knowledge, of the transcendental principles of such knowledge, and of the self-knowledge required for recognizing the illusions that are endemic to reason. If so, then Kant's innovative insight here is that reason's determinations are no gift; reason is the *source* of its *own* determinations. Since knowledge is the exercise of reason, it is the *determination* of and by reason. Reason is thereby spontaneous, and its acts of knowing are spontaneously determined.

6 So, the topic of the spontaneity of reason is the topic of reason's self-determination. At this highest point of pure reason—the point at which reason critiques itself—reason *dismisses* its "groundless pretensions" and *secures* its "rightful claims" (Axi-xii). Reason's determination of just what counts as rightful possession or mere pretension involves its knowing *why* this is so. If Kant is right, then reason gives itself determinations in no other way than by cognizing those determinations. Reason is spontaneous because it is self-determining, which is to say that it is self-knowing.

7 But then spontaneity describes not just a property attaching to the faculty of reason; it describes the faculty of reason itself.[3] Reason *is* spontaneity and spontaneity *is* reason. This would be a way of understanding Kant's two pivotal and most often cited statements regarding spontaneity at A50-51/B74-75:

8 a) […] the first [source of cognition in the mind] is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (spontaneity of concepts) […].

9 If we will call the *receptivity* of our mind to receive representations insofar as it is affected in some way *sensibility*, then on the contrary the faculty for bringing forth representations itself, or the *spontaneity* of cognition, is the *understanding*.

10 Passage (a) describes the spontaneity of concepts as the ability to *cognize* an object *by means of* those concepts; passage (b) describes the spontaneity of the faculty of understanding as that of bringing forth (*Hervorbringen*) representations from itself. Both of these points are reflected in my proposed interpretation: the spontaneity of knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] *is* cognition by means of its own concepts, those concepts brought forth from itself.

11 In the section of the *Critique* where the above pivotal remarks occur—the introduction to logic in general—Kant takes the faculty of understanding to be the faculty of thinking and of concepts (and later, judgments and rules), encompassing within itself the whole of logic.[4] Thus, the spontaneity which is identified with the faculty of understanding in this section of the book is no different than the spontaneity of the higher faculty of knowledge, or the spontaneity of reason taken broadly.

12

Absolute and Relative Spontaneity: What's the Problem?

13 Aside from its fit with these bits of text, there are good philosophical reasons why Kant takes reason to be spontaneous in just this way. We will explore those reasons by turning our attention to a specific question often raised in the broader discussion of Kant's theory of spontaneity: is the *Critique*'s faculty of understanding spontaneous in an *absolute* or a merely *relative* sense?[5] The question assumes an intelligible distinction. However, understanding it takes some untangling. Wilfrid Sellars introduced the term 'relative spontaneity' to a modern audience of Kant students, drawing on some terminology that Kant himself uses in several places. Sellars defines a 'relatively' spontaneous faculty as one that:

14 (1) requires an object to be given to it from elsewhere;

15 (2) is automatic in following a "set routine" or in acting from "set dispositions".[6]

16 As some have pointed out, the trouble here is that (1) seems to be just as true for the absolutely spontaneous faculty of freedom as it is for the understanding, though perhaps they differ in just how the object is given or what that object is.[7] And (2) does not *obviously* apply to the understanding.[8] For, if we take Kant at his word, we must take him seriously when he says that the *Critique* "admits absolutely no implanted or innate representations" (AA 8: 221).[9] With no innate representations, together with Kant's rejection of empiricism, any "set routine" that reason follows would be a routine set or determined by reason's own activity. In fact, this is the very point of the 'epigenetic' picture of the understanding endorsed by Kant in the final passages of the Deduction (B165-68): the understanding acquires its pure concepts and principles through its own synthetic apperceptive activity.

17 If this means that the understanding is *not* relatively spontaneous, then it seems it must be absolutely spontaneous.[10] So, the battle appears to be won! But for all that has been said so far, none of it yet explains just what it *means* for understanding to be spontaneous in a 'non-relative' and therefore 'absolute' way—partly because we do not have any precise sense of what these terms mean. What does it mean for a spontaneity to be 'absolute' if we admit that it depends on a

receptive faculty of sensibility and is therefore not entirely self-sufficient? But even more overlooked than this is the question what qualification 'relative' should give to spontaneity. In one completely innocent sense, Kant recognizes any spontaneity as having a *relation* to something.[11] Is the thought that reason should not have to do only with itself, as in formal logic (Bix), but reach outside of itself to objects? Then no debate is necessary. The real debate creeps in when we ask for the ultimate source of reason's determinations (both the determinations that result *from* it and what is determined *of* reason). Is the passive faculty of sensibility upon which we rely a mere 'enabling condition' for knowledge, or does it contribute a determination to that knowledge?[12] The latter possibility would imply that knowledge is a hybrid of two self-standing elements, each of which contributes a determining factor. This comes closest to describing a theme running throughout the varieties of the relative spontaneity thesis, and one which I believe Kant rejects in the *Critique*.

18 I will now briefly frame the basic problem to be addressed. What I claim is that the proper distinction between 'relative' and 'absolute' spontaneity should be drawn along the following lines: a *relative* spontaneity (RS), for Kant, is a kind of activity whose determinations are comprehensible not entirely within the activity itself, but in relation to something else; an *absolute* spontaneity (AS), for Kant, is a kind of activity whose determinations are comprehended fully *only* from within itself. Then, after giving a sketch of Kant's rejection of RS, I will discuss a problem that I believe still plagues some accounts of AS.

19

Troubles with Drawing the Absolute-Relative Distinction

20 A standard way of representing the relative-absolute distinction is to depict the activity of theoretical reason's faculty of understanding as akin to the acts of a computer, or some automatic program that manipulates an input in a pre-determined manner. This example is owing mostly to Wilfrid Sellars's famous 1970 paper on the topic, and it survives to this day as the primary exemplar of a merely 'relative' spontaneity.[13]

21 The most plausible motivation behind drawing the initial distinction in this way is that Kant himself does so in various places. For instance, Kant defines 'absolute spontaneity' as the 'transcendental freedom' belonging to the will [*Wille*]; and when he refers to the *non*-absolute form of spontaneity, he defines it in terms of the freedom of a mechanism. Kant describes this distinction most famously in both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in his metaphysics lectures. In the former, Kant distinguishes between the absolute spontaneity of transcendental freedom and the merely 'comparative' freedom that would belong to a mechanism such as a turnspit: while a transcendentally free will acts entirely from itself, the comparatively or relatively free turnspit operates from an internal principle which is itself externally fixed or determined (AA 5: 97). Hence, once the turnspit is wound up (acted upon by an external force), it is in a position to "accomplish movements of itself" in relation to its given condition, whereas the absolutely spontaneous will excludes any external force acting upon it and issues its movements entirely from itself. In the 1770s Pölitz Metaphysics lectures, Kant clearly distinguishes between the transcendental or absolute conception of spontaneity (spontaneity *without qualification*) from 'automatic' spontaneity (spontaneity *with qualification*, *under a condition*, or *in some respect*). He says that automatic (or qualified or conditioned) spontaneity is what happens when a *machine* moves itself according to an inner principle. In this case, he says, the inner principle is not 'absolute', since it must be acted upon by an external force (such as the watchmaker winding the watch). By contrast, he says, absolute (or *un*qualified) spontaneity happens when an act is performed from an inner principle which is *not* fixed or determined by anything else (AA 28: 267-68).

22 For the above reasons, in the recent scholarship on this topic it has been common to identify AS with 'transcendental freedom' and hence the kind of freedom characteristic of the will.[14] Likewise, it is common to identify RS with the freedom of a turnspit or a mere mechanism. And interpreters take both sides of the issue: some declare that the absolute/relative split occurs along the practical/theoretical split (and hence that the spontaneity of the understanding is relative while the spontaneity of willing is absolute), while others declare that the spontaneity of the

understanding is, even though not identical with the freedom of willing, nevertheless a species of transcendental freedom.

23 There are, however, some difficulties attached to the idea that the spontaneity of the understanding might be transcendental freedom. By far the most worrisome, on my view, is that Kant consistently relates 'transcendental freedom' to an efficient productive causal power, even when he is not discussing the paradigmatic case of *willing*. But this should be contrasted with the sort of power belonging to the understanding as the faculty of theoretical knowing that is investigated in the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique*. In one sense, the worry just is that the identification of AS with transcendental freedom elides the theoretical/practical distinction. For it would need to be shown that the efficient productive causality of a self-conscious power is not just the notion of practical reason. After all, Kant understands practical reason to be the capacity to know an object by making it actual, i.e., by producing it. But assuming one can get around this particular worry, there is still an underlying attempt here to 'objectify' spontaneity—to bring it into view as the object or material of knowledge—which I believe Kant rejects.

24 Once these worries are spelled out more clearly, we will be led to the main point which I'd like to motivate in this paper—namely, that the spontaneity of the understanding can only be understood *as* the self-consciousness of knowledge, *from within* that self-conscious perspective. Kant's explication of this self-conscious perspective takes place in the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique*, through the rejection of two alternative 'perspectives' on reason's activity: the rationalist one ('preformationism') and the empiricist one ('*generatio aequivoca*'). It is rather Kant's theory of the 'epigenesis' of pure reason that illuminates the nature of reason's spontaneity.

25

Kant's Non-Relative Account of Understanding's Spontaneity

26 Now I want to spell out why Kant rejects RS in the first *Critique*. We will do this by taking something of a bird's-eye point of view, from which we will see that reason's formal self-knowledge (the spontaneity of critique seen in §1) is exhibited in the understanding's 'epigenetic' self-development.

27

From Formal to Material Knowledge

28 The *Critique*'s Preface makes clear the problem to be faced: how to "transform the accepted procedure of metaphysics" and set it upon the secure path of a science (Bxxii). It is characteristic of such security that something in this science is cognized *a priori*, "and this cognition can relate to its object in either of two ways, either merely *determining* the object and its concept (which must be given from elsewhere), or else also *making* the object *actual*" (Bix-x). Kant calls the former *theoretical* knowledge and the latter *practical*. But, while these employments of reason differ with respect to whether the actuality of the object is given or made, what they share is *a priori* cognition of the object. To cognize something in the object *a priori* is to cognize it independently of experience—what Kant calls 'pure' cognition (B1-3). Theoretical and practical cognition each have their 'pure' part, and "[i]n both the *pure* part, the part in which reason determines its object wholly *a priori*, must be expounded all by itself […]" (Bx). The distinction between theoretical and practical cognition notwithstanding, reason always *determines* the object of cognition *a priori*, which is to say, the exercise of *knowledge* (the proper exercise of this capacity in each employment) is brought forth from reason itself. Reason determines this knowledge for itself.

29 One might have worried initially that the description of reason's self-critique in §1 illustrates only an *ideal* of self-reflection—that is, one not immanent to any act of knowledge, but a *second* act of reflection on our knowing that (one hopes) clarifies which claims reason is and is not entitled to. But this can be put to rest upon seeing that the spontaneity of reason on display in the Preface is already implicated in the possibility of knowledge of *what is*, or theoretical knowledge. While the shift from the sphere of pure formal logic to that of material knowledge (including

metaphysics) occurs when reason becomes concerned not only with itself, but with an object, Kant is adamant that the purely *formal* self-knowledge of logic in general is not left behind. In fact, as we have already seen, material knowledge always has its 'pure part' through which the object is *determined*.

30 The implication here is that even while pure reason, abstracted from objects, has to do only with itself, this empty or objectless self-conscious capacity can be understood as nothing but the *form* of some material for cognition. Pure general logic (or 'formal' logic) is nothing but the science of the rules of the understanding in general, abstracting from all objects (A52/B76; JL 12). One might try to read into this that the understanding is itself an object which this science thinks about. But there is no hyperbole in what Kant says here. The understanding which is studied by the science of logic is not an 'object' in the sense of being the *material* of this thinking. For, according to Kant, the science of the understanding is the science of *mere form* (A55/B79; JL 12). How can logic study the rules of the understanding if the understanding is no object? The answer is less obscure if we remind ourselves that the study of the rules of the understanding *is* the business of the understanding. The consciousness in my acts of thinking rules in general *just is* the understanding's consciousness of itself as constituted by certain rules. In this case, in fact, what thinks is identical with what is thought.[15] This identity of consciousness with what it is a consciousness of is, in fact, a way of indicating how it is a consciousness of *mere form*. For, insofar as we are describing nothing but an act of consciousness, we are describing nothing but the 'determining' aspect of thought and never something which awaits determination. Regarding the distinction between matter and form, "[t]he former signifies the determinable in general, the latter its determination" (A266/B322). And being conscious of myself (the 'I' of understanding) in a way that the 'object' of consciousness *is* just the act itself, is consciousness of my "*determining* self" as opposed to "the *determinable* self" or the self as object (B407).

31 Thinking about the rules of thinking is thinking about nothing but acts of determining, and hence nothing but form. However, Kant also notes that this same consciousness of form is consciousness of a faculty that "demands first that something be given (at least in the concept) in order to be able to determine it in a certain way" (A267/B322-23). Kant here reminds us that while form and matter count as distinct contributions to cognition (something which Kant in essence points out in the B Introduction, B1-2), and therefore can be considered *as* distinct elements, they require one another in knowledge.[16] However, insofar as the contribution of *form* is the 'determination' and that of *matter* the 'determinable', it is clear that the form of knowledge plays the role of *bringing it about* that some material *is* thus-and-so—viz., giving form to matter. Indeed, for Kant, to 'determine' is to fix a predicate to some subject concept and thereby exclude all contrary predicates (AA 01: 391). This act of determining *enlarges* the subject—i.e., it does not merely add a representation to the subject concept, but rather integrates material into form (A598/B626). As Kant says regarding synthetic unity in general, it does not come about simply "by my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but rather by my *adding* one representation to the other and being conscious of their synthesis" (B133). In other words, a unity of experience does not arise either from a mere multiplicity of conscious acts of representing *or* from merely adding one representation to another, but from adding one representation to another *and being conscious of their synthesis*. The addition of the predicate 'is white' to 'the squirrel' enlarges the concept of the squirrel only insofar as there is one consciousness of the white squirrel. In this way, not only does the concept grow, but so does my unity of self-consciousness in general. This synthetic act is one of growth or becoming, where this key notion is understood to be a continual but seamless (non-aggregative) act of integrating material into form.

32 It must therefore be that the act of knowing, as one that involves a synthetic judgment, is an expansion of the understanding. And this expansion, it is now clear, is a *self*-expansion, since the incorporation of material into form is the *act* of *determining* that material. Hence, while the spontaneity of reason may have its origin in pure reason's (objectless) thought of itself, it descends into and is retained in material knowledge. Now, if we can make it clear why this self-expansion of the understanding is only intelligible as described and *not* as the ('relative') self-expansion of something from an innate or "set" disposition, then we will see more clearly why Kant is definitively rejecting RS in the Transcendental Analytic.

33 Spontaneity as the Self-Conscious Epigenesis of Pure Reason

34 Why, then, is this spontaneity 'absolute' or non-relative? Recall Kant's early definition of AS: the activity of a capacity whose principle is not determined by anything further. Hence, the spontaneity of the understanding, if 'absolute', is the activity of a capacity whose principle is *self*-determining. The details of this self-determining activity can be gleaned from a look at any synthetic determination, but for the sake of getting into view reason as the whole higher faculty of knowledge, it is most helpful to consider how the self-determining activity of reason in the Preface now comes to be spelled out as the self-determining activity which gives rise to experience itself in the Transcendental Analytic.

35 This is done by arguing that reason is an 'epigenetic' system. The term is borrowed from the classical biological theory that an embryo is generated by the combination of parent cells. Standing in contrast to this is the 'preformation' theory according to which the embryo is already fully formed from the beginning, requiring only external stimulation to grow. We can see that a preformationist system of reason resembles the *turnspit*, which acts from itself only as it is set into motion from the outside (here the 'outside' would be implanted or innate principles of activity). Rejecting this, Kant embraces the epigenetic account because it is the only way to understand the synthetic *a priori* expansion of reason that we just described.[17] Why is this?

36 Kant's argument is as follows. There are only two possible ways for experience to exhibit a necessary agreement with concepts: either the experience makes the concepts possible (the 'empiricist' explanation), or the concepts make the experience possible. The empiricist's approach would be, Kant says, a *generatio aequivoca*, or what is now referred to as 'abiogenesis'.[18] There is simply no intelligible route from mere sense impressions to *a priori* concepts, given that the latter are by definition independent of experience. Hence, Kant says, the only option remaining is that *a priori* concepts make experience possible (B166-67). However, from where do we derive such concepts? A classical rationalist may think the only way to avoid a *generatio aequivoca* would be to claim that *a priori* concepts are innate.[19] This—the preformationist alternative—must now be rejected on pain of admitting that reason is a mere conscious turnspit, or an *automaton spirituale* (AA 5: 97).

37 Kant rejects the preformationist alternative on the grounds that it would not permit me to judge anything *of the object* itself. In the judgment of a causal relation, for instance: "I would not be able to say that the effect is combined with the cause in the object (i.e., necessarily), but only that I am so constituted that I cannot think of this representation otherwise than as so connected; which is precisely what the skeptic wishes most […]" (B168). The concepts by which I judge the event would exhibit no necessity, or at least not the sort of necessity required for synthetic *a priori* judgments.[20] This is because these concepts would be mere limitations on my thinking—i.e., I would not be able to think otherwise. But an *in*ability to think these objects as non-causally related is plainly not an ability to judge them *to be* causally related. At most, this would reflect a mere disposition or tendency of the mind (perhaps a Humean custom of constant conjunction) rather than any insight into the object. This would play directly into the skeptic's hands, Kant thinks, because it would enable them to point out the mere fantasy in taking for true what may simply be nothing but a cognitive restriction in my person.

38 To put it plainly, Kant's argument for the epigenetic account of the understanding is that our judgments of experience *do in fact* exhibit a necessity that is not the mere restriction on thinking that a custom or habit may force upon us, and therefore these judgments reflect an ability rather than a restriction. Why should we think so? Because when I judge that the squirrel is white, no reference to my individual person is made as part of the determination of this object. And yet if the judgment were a reflection of my cognitive limits—of what I cannot help but think—then it would necessarily contain reference to those limits; what I say would contain what I am. By contrast, the judgment that the squirrel is white contains nothing about me beyond a consciousness of what must be thought by any rational being under similar circumstances. That is, the self-consciousness of this judgment is a consciousness not of an individual, but of a universal 'I'. The 'I think' that serves as the vehicle for

this judgment is nothing but the consciousness of the rational necessity of judging these representations as belonging together, and so it sees all the way through, 'transparently' we might say, to the object. In this way, the apperceptive 'I' brings life to the material of judgment without dividing or sliding into consciousness "like an opaque blade".[21] As Kant himself puts it in this conclusion to the Transcendental Deduction: the epigenetic conception of reason tells us that "the categories contain the grounds of the possibility of all experience in general from the side of the understanding" (B167). That is, the knowledge of objects (experience) is itself made possible by the (self-conscious) act of the understanding whereby the categories are (self-) thought.

39 Hence, I believe Kant is suggesting that the empiricist and the preformationist would be equally incapable of accounting for the self-conscious perspective that we actually exhibit in judgments of experience—namely, the perspective from which what is predicated of the object does not include any reference to my individual inability to think otherwise, but instead reflects only my *ability* (the capacity) to express what must be thought by anyone under the same circumstances. The necessary and universal (and so *a priori*) concepts involved here are therefore not simply found in me. They must rather be necessarily and universally valid *because* they express the necessary and universal perspective of reason. They are therefore "self-thought" by the capacity of reason that is shared by all beings who can say 'I'.

40 The spontaneity of understanding, insofar as its origin is in the sort of self-consciousness that has been spelled out in §§1-2, is a kind of self-knowledge belonging to reason. But it is not knowledge of a particular kind of object, nor of a particular kind of power or force attaching to an object. Spontaneity essentially resists objectification, which is to say that it is only intelligible from within first-person self-conscious activity. This does not mean, by contrast with the case of objective or material knowledge, that it is knowledge of a particular set of epistemic conditions or a 'perspective', insofar as that indicates a point of view that can in principle come apart from my *being* spontaneous as a rational being. For, as we have just seen, Kant holds that the self-consciousness of synthetic judging is just the in-forming of the material for that judgment. It is therefore nothing that could be added to the content, whether that were by being a particular sort of object or a particular perspective that could be inhabited. In a synthetic judgment there is, rather, an identity between my consciousness and that of which I am conscious.

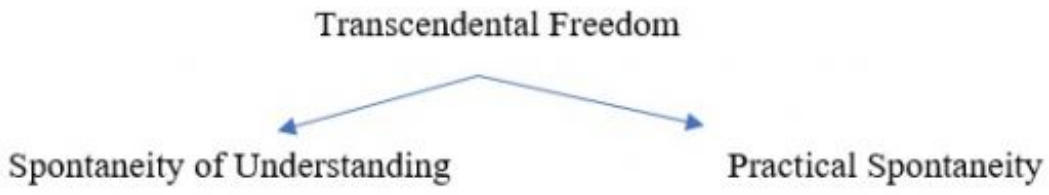
41

Spontaneity as the 'Transcendental Freedom' of the Understanding?

42 As noted in §1, debates over the correct interpretation of spontaneity (theoretical or practical) tend to presuppose that the answer belongs either to Kant's 'metaphysics' or his 'epistemology'. That is, spontaneity is assumed to be either a metaphysical *causal force* or an epistemic *perspective* on our cognitive activity.[22] I have suggested in §2 that the spontaneity of the understanding is rather a form of reason's self-knowledge which is *neither* objective material knowledge *nor* the taking of a certain epistemic perspective.

43 However, it has been suggested that to reject RS is to accept that the spontaneity of reason is what Kant calls 'transcendental freedom', and hence that the spontaneity of the understanding is a form of transcendental freedom.[23] Before concluding this paper, I want to briefly look at what this would mean as a treatment of the understanding. If this were true, then presumably both the spontaneity of the understanding as well as practical spontaneity would be species of transcendental freedom:

44



45 We first encountered the notion of transcendental freedom (*TF*) as Kant's example of AS in a passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason.* However, in Kant's mature philosophy the concept first emerges in reason's illicit (dialectical) attempt to theoretically know the world as containing a first beginning of a causal series of appearances, and *then* it is discussed as an idea that may be *assumed* either theoretically (in "doctrinal belief") or practically.[24] In neither case is it explicitly tied to the spontaneity of the understanding.[25]

46 As the concept first arises in the *Critique*, TF is a "cosmological" concept—that is, a concept regarding "the sum total of all appearances (the world)" (A334/B391). The cosmological concept of TF is that of "a faculty of beginning a series of successive things or states *from itself*" which makes comprehensible the origin of the world (A448/B476). It is a mere idea of reason which enables us to think a first beginning of all states of the world. Kant then wonders whether the human will might be a first beginning of a new series of *actions*. If we could prove the reality of the cosmological concept, then we could also "allow that in the course of the world different series may begin on their own as far as their causality is concerned, and to ascribe to the substances in those series the faculty of acting from freedom" (A450/B478). Kant leaves open here the possibility that there may be individual substances which could begin their own new causal series. In neither case are we talking about the sort of spontaneity which I believe is recognizable in the understanding—not because the understanding is only a relative spontaneity, but because its *non*-relative form of spontaneity fits neither of these models. Let me briefly suggest why I think this is so, based on what we have established above about the spontaneity of reason generally.

47 First, in order for TF to be a spontaneity imputable to the human being, it must be a self-conscious capacity, since I am only responsible for something insofar as it relates to my knowledge of it. I must in this way either bring forth the mere *form* of what is known (as in theoretical knowledge) or also make the object *actual* (as in practical knowledge). In the paradigmatic case of practical knowledge, I bring about the actuality of the object by knowing what is *good* or what *should be* (AA 5: 57-58). The consciousness involved in this act is therefore one of knowing what is *not yet*, but *to be made*, actual. The freedom involved here (TF) is a consciousness of what I am to produce or effect. This contrasts with the kind of consciousness involved in theoretical knowledge. In the latter, I bring forth not the actuality of the object, but its form. But this also marks a distinction in the kind of self-consciousness I have in the judging of this object. I judge not that something is *to be*, but that *it is so*. As we have seen, theoretical judging is also an expansion of the understanding as it acquires new material. But because it is an expansion of the understanding, this judgment incorporates something into (and hence makes it part of) a pre-existing unity of self-consciousness (my knowledge). This growth is a kind of becoming, but not *change* or material *production*. It therefore does not exhibit certain temporal features that might very well apply in the case of TF. For instance, I do not say *I was knowing, and now I have known*. To be knowing is at once to have known, and once the act of knowing takes place it sustains itself as knowledge.[26] In the practical case, by contrast, I can say that while I *was acting*, I *have now acted*.[27]

48 But even TF in the cosmological sense exhibits these temporal features that seem to have no place in theoretical knowing. For, the cosmological concept is simply that of a first beginning of all appearances—that is, all objects, states, events, in the world. But *judgment* is not an appearance. It is not even an *experience* that I think, according to Kant, for there is a sharp difference between what I apprehend in perception and that of which "I am entirely the author" (R 5661, AA 18: 319).[28] Kant's more difficult but ultimately illuminating explanation of this is that I cannot find in myself

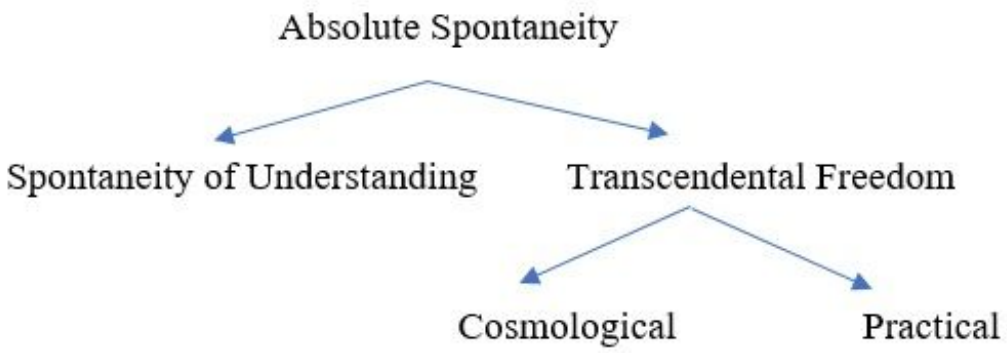
"a self-intuition, which would give the *determining* in me, of the spontaneity of which alone I am conscious, even before the act of *determination*" (B158n). That is, I cannot passively intuit that which is my act; I cannot be *given* what I *do*. Hence, if judgment is the determination of the understanding, then the understanding's self-determined acts are not to be understood as a series of appearances, states, or occurrences of any kind. No such perspective is available, at least without destroying the idea of judgment. But it is a key feature of TF that the absolutely first beginning is the beginning of a *series*. To be sure, it is presumably true that this beginning cannot bring about a series without being a self-conscious power of production, and hence it is a genuine specification of absolute spontaneity. But it is a power to produce something that *can* be known as an appearance, state, event, or occurrence. While TF contains the activity of AS, it does not capture the essence of AS, for it is a mere specification of it.[29]

49

Conclusion

50 In §2 we saw that there is good reason to reject any attempt to cognize our spontaneity as though it were an object, as well as any attempt to relegate spontaneity to a kind of perspective one could either inhabit or discard. In §3 we considered how this concept of AS is not the concept of transcendental freedom. I want to conclude by saying a few words about why the concept of AS I have illustrated here may not be represented in the standard division of 'metaphysical' and 'epistemic' readings of Kant. The illicit attempt to 'objectify' spontaneity falls neatly into the category of 'metaphysical' readings, as it supposes that it is possible on Kant's view at least to *believe in* or even justifiably *ascribe to* the individual thinker a certain power. This is typically opposed to 'epistemic' readings of Kant, according to which his most important insights regard the normative conditions on our thinking and judging *as opposed to* conditions on being.[30] On my reading, however, the spontaneity of the understanding is neither strictly a 'metaphysical' nor an 'epistemic' issue—not because it is both, but because it is prior to any such distinction:

51



52 The absolute spontaneity of reason resides originally in the logical self-consciousness *presupposed* by any material knowledge at the level of theoretical or practical reason ("spontaneity of understanding" and "transcendental freedom").

Remarks:

1. Kant calls 'pure reason' "cognition from *a priori* principles" (KU 5: 167), and he identifies 'pure reason' as "the higher faculty of cognition" (KU 20: 201) and "the entire higher faculty of cognition" (A835/B863). See Preface B of the *Critique* for Kant's interchangeable use of 'reason' and 'understanding', particularly with respect to being a faculty of logical cognition which has to do with nothing but itself (KrV Bix-x).

2. For example, see Pippin 1987, Allison 1990, Ellis 2017, McLear 2020.

3. Hence why Kant not only characterizes particular acts of judging as spontaneous acts, but also the capacity of

understanding *itself* as spontaneity (A51/B75). The most straightforward way of reading this is to say that 'spontaneous act' just means 'an act brought forth spontaneously—viz., through a spontaneous capacity'.

4. See also the footnote to B134, where Kant famously identifies the *faculty* of understanding with the synthetic unity of apperception and says that this unity is the highest point even of the whole of logic. And again, at B428, Kant remarks that "Thinking, taken in itself, is merely the logical function and hence the sheer spontaneity of combining the manifold of a merely possible intuition […]".

5. Classic examples include Sellars 1970, Pippin 1987, Allison 1990, Kitcher 1990. Recent examples include Sgarbi 2012, Grüne 2013, Kohl 2015, Ellis 2017, McLear 2020.

6. Sellars 1970, p. 25.

7. Allison 1990, 62.

8. Cf. McLear 2020.

9. Kant even says that the *Critique* assumes no foundations whatsoever beyond reason itself (AA 4: 274). If we take this seriously, there seems to be no choice but to read the *Critique* as an account of reason's self-development. Indeed, in this very same passage he notes that the aim of the *Critique* is to "develop cognition out of its original seeds without relying on any fact whatever."

10. Though, interestingly, Grüne 2013 claims that we have no reason to adopt one or the other of these theses on behalf of the understanding. I disagree, in part because I think the relative spontaneity thesis falls away as soon as we locate the determinations of reason within the self-conscious activity of reason. But we will see this in more detail soon.

11. Sometimes this is all that an interpreter means by 'relative spontaneity', it seems.

12. For the former view, see for instance Engstrom (2006); for the latter, see for instance Hanna (2017), who argues that sensibility's deliverances '*under*determine' the outputs of cognition.

13. Sellars 1970, "This I or He or It, the Thing which Thinks…".

14. However, defenders of AS will emphasize, correctly, that Kant rejects doxastic voluntarism.

15. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* 430a3-a9.

16. Here we should recall that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (A51/B75).

17. It is worth nothing that from time to time, Kant refers to spontaneity as the "self-activity" (*selbsttätigkeit*) of reason, which is consistent with his calling the categories "self-thought" (*selbstgedachte*) in this section of the Transcendental Deduction. See, e.g., B167. Cf. also B68-69; B130; A418/B446.

18. Cf. Aristotle's account of certain 'spontaneously' generated forms of life in *History of Animals*, Book V.

19. After all, we might wonder, how is it even possible to conceive of something so strange as a "self-acquisition" of *a priori* concepts? A full answer is outside the scope of the present paper, but it should be noted that Kant is very serious about this point, as he asserts elsewhere that even the pure intuitions of space and time are self-acquired (AA 08: 221). But also remember that this is idea is nothing but a further specification of the original idea of reason's development presented in the Preface, as Kant there makes it very clear that we begin with nothing but the activity of reason itself (no substantive or factual assumptions are made at all).

20. I also discuss this point in Ellis (2017), though in what follows I consider a new dimension to Kant's reasoning—namely, that spontaneity expresses an ability rather than an in-ability.

21. Cf. Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego*, p. 40. Contrary to the concern Sartre has with Husserl's transcendental 'I', Kant's transcendental 'I' does not kill, but rather enlivens, experience.

22. This can be gleaned from discussions of the secondary literature in, e.g., the work of Ameriks. Ameriks (1992, 2012) argues against Allison's 'epistemic' interpretation of Kant by putting forth a 'metaphysical' interpretation.

23. Most recently McLear (2020) has made such an argument. I will not be able to comment extensively on his interesting and comprehensive treatment of the topic in this paper, but what follows suggests that I think Kant's view diverges from McLear's reading.

24. The nuances of the distinction between these types of assumption are too complicated to deal with fully here. Kant addresses 'doctrinal' belief in the Canon as a theoretical "analogue" of practical judgment (A825/B853). McLear (2020) recently discusses the possibility that we could know the spontaneity of our understanding in this way. I think this cannot be right. Since the spontaneity of understanding is constitutive of any act of the understanding, there is nothing to *believe* about it except perhaps in a *further* act.

25. Kant does sometimes attribute transcendental freedom to understanding in, e.g., the Metaphysik Mrongovius lectures (AA 29: 862; 900). But here 'understanding' is used to refer to the faculty of choice.

26. A similar point is made in Engstrom (2009, 236).

27. The upshot of this, which is something to be spelled out in a different paper, is that spontaneity is no causal *process* (*kinesis*), but a self-conscious *energeia*.

28. While there may be an appearance *of* judging, there is no act of judging that *is itself* an appearance. Kant notes for instance that with regard to the understanding's effect on inner sense in figurative synthesis, "We also always perceive this in ourselves" (B154).

29. The other main criticism I would lodge against the TF interpretation is very much related to this final point: TF comes too late on the scene, in the sense that as the concept of an efficient causal power it already contains the more generic idea of AS. This cannot be spelled out further here, unfortunately.

30. See, for example, Ameriks's discussion of this difference (1992).

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“Relative” Spontaneity and Reason’s Self-Knowledge

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Аннотация

Kant holds that the whole “higher faculty of knowledge” (‘reason’ or ‘understanding’ in a broad sense), is a spontaneous faculty. But what could this mean? It seems that it could either be a perfectly innocent claim or a very dangerous one. The innocent thought is that reason is spontaneous because it is not wholly passive, not just a slave to what bombards the senses. If so, then the rejection of Hume’s radical empiricism would suffice for Kant’s claim. But the dangerous thought is that reason, and the ‘I think’ which expresses it, is free, having the power to produce something entirely from itself. While this freedom is characteristic of practical reason, could it be characteristic of reason in general, even in its theoretical employment? Some contemporary interpreters have admirably defended the ‘dangerous’ conception by stripping it of the implication that it makes reason in general entirely self-sufficient. I attempt to add to this effort. However, what I contend is that this weightier conception of spontaneity (‘absolute’ or ‘non-relative’ spontaneity) requires abandoning a certain approach to the question that has been assumed by virtually everyone in the debate—namely, that the question can be answered by siding with either the so-called ‘metaphysical’ or the ‘epistemic’ interpreters of Kant. My goal is to suggest that the proper perspective on reason’s spontaneity resists such characterizations all together, and thereby resists any of the conditions under which it could be understood as ‘relative’ to anything.

Ключевые слова: reason, understanding, spontaneity, self-knowledge, transcendental freedom

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