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Practical Action: First Critique Foundations
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Both European and Anglo-American philosophical traditions of Kant scholarship draw a sharp distinction between Kant's theoretical and practical philosophies. They cite KrV, A 14.23-28; KrV, A 15.01-09; KrV, B 28.22-28; KrV, B 29.01-12 as evidence that the analyses of intuition, understanding and reason proffered in the first *Critique*¹ apply to cognition only, and therefore do not significantly illuminate his analyses of inclination, desire, or respect for the moral law in the *Groundwork*, second *Critique*, *Metaphysics of Morals*, or *Religion*. This paper is part of a larger project that takes issue with this near-universal consensus, and with the canonical interpretation of KrV, A 14.23-28; KrV, A 15.01-09; KrV, B 28.22-28; KrV, B 29.01-12. Many of the most important terms in Kant's mature moral philosophy – such as “action,” “reason,” “freedom,” “will,” “categorical,” “imperative,” “ought,” “maxim,” “duty,” “inclination,” “end,” and “idea” – are introduced, and sometimes elaborated at length, in the first *Critique*; and often appear in the *Groundwork* with little or no further elaboration. This suggests that Kant intended the analysis of self and rationality in the first *Critique* to serve as a formal foundation for his subsequent analysis of practical deliberation and moral motivation in the *Groundwork*. Here I argue specifically that Kant's use of the first-/third-person asymmetry in his analysis of action in the first *Critique*'s Resolution of the Third Antinomy is necessary to his account of moral motivation and moral intention in the *Groundwork*; and that the structure of pure apperception he offers in the Transcendental Deduction resolves this asymmetry.

I. THE DUAL CHARACTER OF ACTION

An action, for Kant, notoriously has two aspects: an *empirical character* as an event viewed third-personally within the natural network of cause and effect – what he calls an “effect of nature” (KrV, A 543.15-16). This is Kant's version of the behavioral theory of revealed preference, for the empirical character of one's effects in the world – i.e. of one's physical actions – reveal the “powers and faculties” that cause those actions (KrV, A 546.18) when, as he says, “we are simply *observing*, and, as happens in anthropology, wish to investigate physiologically the motive causes of [another's] actions” (KrV, A 550.08-11).

¹ Kant, Immanuel: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Herausg. Raymund Schmidt. Hamburg, 1976. References to this work are paginated in the text. All translations from the German are mine.

For a real action, unlike merely reflexive behavior, is also “an effect of freedom” (KrV, A 543. 15-16), i.e. the effect of a non-empirical, intelligible cause (KrV, A 544.18-19), i.e. the agent’s own understanding and reason (KrV, A 547.03). These constitute the action’s first-person *intelligible character*, which Kant describes as “the transcendental cause of [its] empirical character ... in so far as this [the intelligible character] is denoted through the empirical as its sensible sign” (KrV, A 546.06-09). This we are bidden to ignore, in favor of the action’s empirical character as the “supreme ground of explanation” of the action. Yet even if we do Kant’s bidding, understanding and especially reason resurface in such an explanation, first, through their revelation in third-person observable behavior:

Reason though it may be, it must nonetheless exhibit an empirical character. [...] Thus every human being’s will has an empirical character, which is nothing but a certain causality of his reason, so far as this reveals, in its effects in appearance, a rule from which we can gather [*abnehmen*] the bases of reason and their actions, according to their kind and degrees, and can assess [*beurtheilen*] the subjective principles of his will (KrV, A 549.01, 14-21).

Thus consistent action upon rational resolves manifests a patterned sequence of events in the empirical world, from which an observer may gather the “rule,” or principle that first-personally guides those actions and motivates one to act. This sequence yields a different kind of causal explanation from that which empirical causality alone supplies. Kant resolves the Third Antinomy by suggesting that both kinds can be true of the same sequence of events simultaneously.

But reason also surfaces more directly, in a causal explanation of action, through our own privileged access to pure apperception in the first-person case:

Only the human being, who is otherwise acquainted with all of nature through sense alone, also knows himself through pure apperception, and indeed in acts and inner determinations that he cannot at all count among the impressions of the senses, [...] in regard to certain faculties [...] because their action cannot at all be ascribed to the receptivity of sensibility. We call these faculties understanding and reason (KrV, A 546.22-26, 27-28; KrV, A 547.1-3).

The action of our faculties of understanding and reason thus cause physical action, through the active and spontaneous “acts and inner determinations” of pure apperception.

Now in the Transcendental Deduction, Kant has already described in much greater detail these “acts and inner determinations” of pure apperception through which we know ourselves and which cause physical action. At KrV, B 150.16-19 he characterizes the ability of

the understanding, as spontaneity, [to] determine [*bestimmen*] inner sense through the manifold of given representations, in accordance with the synthetic unity of apperception [...].

Kant tells us here that understanding does not merely react to incoming sense data. It is also a source of spontaneous, rule-governed synthetic activity. This causally determines inner sense, by synthesizing those representations. At KrV, B 153.12, 19-24; KrV, B154.01-02, he states quite baldly that

understanding [...] is able to determine sensibility inwardly. Thus, [...] under the name of a *transcendental synthesis of imagination*, it performs that very action upon the *passive* subject whose *faculty* it is, about which we rightly say that inner sense is thereby affected [*affiziert*].

Kant’s use of the term “affected” here shows that by “determine” [*bestimmen*], he does not mean merely “instantiate” or “specify”; he means “causally determine.” The understanding is both an efficient and a formal cause of the agent’s inner sensibility, in a manner governed by the particular representational content of its synthetic act. And in the footnote to KrV, B 156, Kant complains that he does not see why anyone should make such a fuss about the suggestion that we causally affect our own sensibility, since this is what it means to pay attention to something:

[I]n every act of attention [*Aufmerksamkeit*], the understanding immediately determines inner sense according to the combination that it thinks, to the inner intuition which corresponds to the manifold in the synthesis of the understanding. How much the mind is usually affected by this, everyone will be able to perceive in himself KrV, B 156 fn. 02, KrV, B 157 fn. 01-06).

To attend to something is thus a spontaneous mental act that supplies a manifold of representations of that thing to inner sense. This act synthesizes these representations into a particular temporal sequence, according to the categorical rules for synthesizing them, and has causal impact on our sensibility.

In the Deduction Kant has not yet taken up the topic of reason’s causality in action. So he does not tell us here how widely this causal impact may ramify throughout our sensibility. But his later reference back to it in the

Third Antinomy establishes that it does extend to our sensory-motor capacities. In the Observation to the Thesis he describes, as an example of reason's ability to initiate a causal series in the empirical world, himself arising from his chair (KrV, A 450.16-18). And in the Resolution, he ascribes to reason the causal power to

consider[r] its objects purely in accordance with ideas and *in accordance with them [to] determin[e] the understanding*, which then makes an empirical use of its own (indeed also pure) concepts (KrV, A 547.05-09; italics added).

If reason causally determines understanding, and understanding causally determines sensibility, including our sensory-motor responses, then reason causally determines our sensory-motor responses – for example, to perform actions such as rising from our chair. Thus the “acts and inner determinations” of reason have an efficient causal impact on our physical behavior in the first-person case. Now let us look more closely at their synthetic formal structure.

II. THE DUAL CHARACTER OF INTENTION

Among our acts of attention are those to what we intend to do. Here we represent ourselves to ourselves not merely as empirical subjects, but as empirical agents performing empirical actions, in advance of actually performing them. We assume the dual standpoint that Kant most clearly describes in Chapter III of the *Groundwork*, when he distinguishes the “standpoint, when we think [*denken*] ourselves through freedom as *a priori* acting causes” (GMS, AA 04:450.37-41), from the standpoint we assume when “we represent [*vorstellen*] ourselves in accordance with our actions as effects that we see before our eyes (*ibid.*).”²

We can assume both standpoints simultaneously. The Resolution of the Third Antinomy requires the simultaneous applicability of both standpoints to the same action. And both standpoints conjointly constitute an analysis of an *intention* to act: We both conceive ourselves first-personally as initiators of action – as “*a priori* acting causes”; and simultaneously represent third-personally the action we will perform as a result – as predicted “effects that we see before our eyes.” This double-sided cognitive act, of conceiving ourselves as the first-person cause of third-personally represented future actions, is Kant's analysis of intention (*Absicht*). On this account, intention is the bridge that connects the intelligible with the sensible world.

² Kant, Immanuel: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. Herausg. Karl Vorländer. Hamburg, 1965. My translation.

Representing ourselves to ourselves as effecting our own predicted actions does not require visualizing the entire acting physical body we see in the mirror, although we might do this on occasion. But it does require representing ourselves empirically, i.e. in future time. We must represent the envisaged series of conative, sensible, and sensory-motor experiences constitutive of our future action as occurring in a projected linear temporal sequence. We also must implicitly understand the connection between those predicted experiences and the predicted visual “effects that we see before our eyes.” Thus we must coordinate our envisaged first-person sensory-motor representations with their envisaged third-person behavioral effects. And we must organize this complex temporal sequence of projected representations according to the rules of synthesis given by the categories. These passages offer the rudiments of an analysis of *motivationally effective* intention, i.e. of how a first-person conception of oneself as performing a predicted empirical action might be causally sufficient to effect its actual physical performance.

Define this motivationally effective mental event as an *intentional resolve* to act. An intentional resolve first-personally conceives one as a third-person empirical agent, deliberately causing a valued effect in the world by performing the future physical action one predicts. Kant describes the empirical character of an action as the “sensible schema” of its intelligible character (KrV, A 553.16-17), so an intentional resolve may be formulated syntactically as a first-person action description, in accordance with Kant’s maxim structure:

[M] M_1 : Out of respect for the moral law [=ground],
 M_2 : I will practice piano an hour a day [=will],
 M_3 : in order to master *The Well-Tempered Clavier* [=end].

In [M], the “out of” locution M_1 identifies the backward-looking motive, or what Kant calls the *ground*. The “I will” locution M_2 identifies the intention, or what Kant calls the *will*. And the “in order to” locution M_3 identifies the forward-looking goal of the action, or what Kant calls the *end*. Kant’s more careful formulations of the maxims in the examples he discusses in the *Groundwork* usually have this three-fold structure (see GMS, Ak. 04:421.24f.; and also GMS, Ak. 04:397.13f., GMS, Ak. 04:402.19f., and GMS, Ak. 04:429.16f.). However, an intentional resolve need not be formulated so explicitly. It is the first-person representation of oneself as a causally effective empirical agent that is definitive. Following O’Neill, I focus here on instances of the form M_2 as the expression of will or intention.

An intention, too, must of course conform to the rules of synthesis given by the categories in order to be conscious; and so it does. These rules are first introduced in the Table of Judgments (KrV, A 70.13-27), and give the categories their distinctive structures in the corresponding Table of Categories

(KrV, A 80.05-24). In both tables, the important ones are the first two relational forms of judgment: first, the categorical, through which we ascribe predicates to subjects – and correspondingly in the Table of Categories, attribute properties to substances; and second, the hypothetical, through which we relate such subjects as antecedent and consequent – and correspondingly in the Table of Categories, relate substances as causes to their effects. Kant acknowledges that substances can also be effects under certain circumstances at KrV, B 252.02-04.

Kant identifies action as a *pure derivative* concept of the understanding, subsumable, together with those of force and passion, under the “original and primitive” category of causality (KrV, A 82.16-17). An action, therefore, is an empirical event that we cognize as a cause enacted by a substance. We rationally conceptualize that action, whether our own or another’s, through the corresponding forms of judgment: We identify it as an event which we predicate of the subject – i.e. the agent – that enacts it. Consider the categorical indicative judgment,

[C]₁] I [subject] will practice piano an hour a day [predicate].

[C]₁] is identical to *M*₂ above. It is an example of first-person predication of action to its subject as its “acting cause.” So the maxim form of an intention instantiates the rule of synthesis offered in the relational category of substance in the Table of Categories; and the dual structure of an intention can be read off from the rules for synthesizing representations in pure apperception that are first introduced in that table. An *intention* just is a categorical indicative judgment, in which the transcendental subject making the judgment first-personally predicates of itself a third-personally represented, future empirical action. Because the judgment form of intention instantiates the categorical indicative rule of synthesis more generally, the “acts and inner determinations” of pure apperception that are governed by it cause us not merely to react or behave randomly, but rather to *act in accordance with this rule*; that is, to actually do what we intend to do. The form of our understanding specifies the form of our intention; and this, in turn, specifies the form of the corresponding action that our intentional resolve causally precipitates.

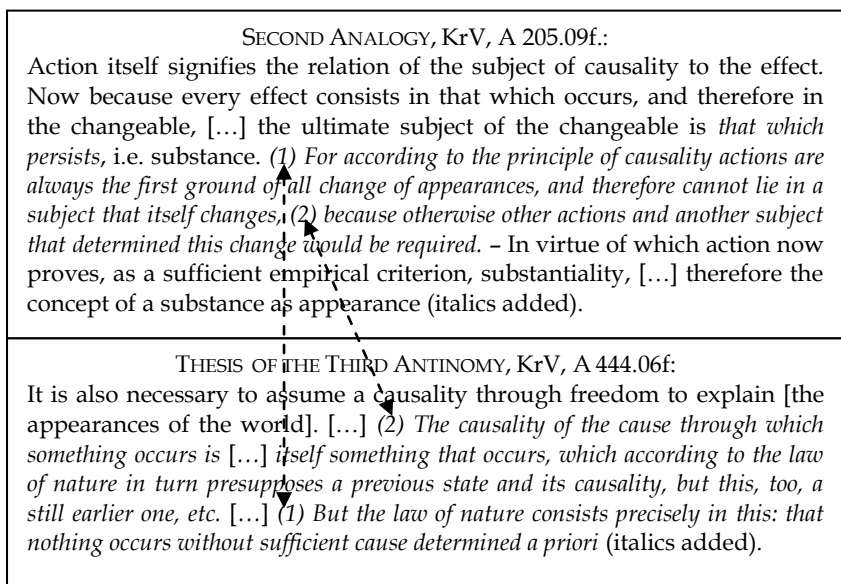
III. THE AGENCY OF EMPIRICAL SUBSTANCES

Now recur to the third-person case, in which *we* need not be moved to act in accordance with these rules ourselves, but instead need merely recognize someone else who is, as a rational human agent and not merely a natural cause. What is it about action that enables us to do this? In the Second Analogy, Kant argues that an action is the empirical criterion that its cause is a substance:

Action itself signifies the relation of the subject of causality to the effect. Now because every effect consists in that which occurs, and therefore in the changeable, [...] the ultimate subject of the changeable is *that which persists*, i.e. substance. For according to the principle of causality actions are always the first ground of all change of appearances, and therefore cannot lie in a subject that itself changes, because otherwise other actions and another subject that determined this change would be required. – In virtue of which action now proves, as a sufficient empirical criterion, substantiality, [...] therefore the concept of a substance as appearance. (KrV, A 205.09f.).

Unless we cognized permanent, acting substances as initiating empirical causal series, he says, we would repeatedly seek previous causes of that one, in an infinite backward regress of empirical effects. But instead, we recognize a certain kind of event specifically as an *action* in that we conceptualize its cause as a substantial first cause that has no such antecedents.

But what compels our recognition of certain empirical events as outside the infinite backward regress of empirical events? Kant's argument in the Second Analogy by itself does not enable us to "gather the bases of reason and their actions, according to their kind and degrees, and ... assess the subjective principles of [another's] will (KrV, A 549.18-21)." The signs that enable us to recognize such first causes are described in the later context of the Thesis of the Third Antinomy. There Kant repeats the same action-as-first-cause argument:



But he adds that this first cause is absolutely spontaneous, begins of itself, and is to be identified as transcendental freedom. From there he concludes, in the Observation to the Thesis, that

[b]ecause the capacity to begin a series in time entirely from itself is thereby proved [...], we are now permitted to let diverse series, in accordance with causality, begin from themselves in the midst of the course of the world, and to ascribe to their substances [*den Substanzen derselben [...] beizulegen*] a capacity to act from freedom. (KrV, A 450.01-08).

Thus the action-as-first-cause argument that surfaced earlier in the Second Analogy, as part of Kant's own analysis of the causality of substance, is repeated and further developed in the Thesis of the Third Antinomy. This indicates that this argument is not merely part of one metaphysically suspect Thesis among four pairs of conflicting ones, but rather Kant's own view: that we detect certain substances through their observable effects because they exhibit the capacity for rule-governed self-causation, i.e. what Kant later, in the *Groundwork*, identifies as autonomy. The autonomous behavior of such substances enables us to recognize the subjective principles of their will as rational agents, rather than mere robots or coats stuffed with straw. And because they initiate causal sequences rather than merely participate as effects in them, we instinctively regard them (and ourselves) as permanent; i.e. as having immortal souls.³ Kant begins laying the foundation for this view in the Second Analogy, and fills in some missing bricks in the B Edition of the Transcendental Deduction (and the Paralogisms), so as to anchor the Resolution of the Third Antinomy more firmly and facilitate the reader's transition to Chapter III of the *Groundwork*.

The plausibility of my interpretation depends on its coherence with Kant's technical treatment of recognition in the synthetic judgmental structure of pure apperception, as it organizes third-person observation of these substances. We make sense of an observed action the way we would make sense of any observed event on Kant's account, namely by synthesizing its manifold representations according to the rules given by the relevant forms of judgment in the Table of Judgments.

Consider two such third-person judgments of the same event:

[C]₂] Piper's fingers repeatedly strike the same extended sequence of notes on the piano keyboard an hour a day.

³ I am grateful to Karl Ameriks for raising this question in discussion.

[C]₃] Piper practices piano an hour a day.

Both are categorical indicative judgments. Both predicate behavior of a subject. Hence both satisfy the formal requirements of the Table of Judgment. Yet [C]₂] fails the requirement of the Table of Categories, that it synthesize the sensible representations given by our intuitive relation to the observed event in such a way as to identify it as a substance. It is not that [C]₂] cannot be true. The problem is that the locution, "Piper's fingers" does not denote a substance. But tinkering with the grammar of [C]₂] such that Piper is the substance to which we attribute the property of

fingers that repeatedly strike the same extended sequence of notes on the piano keyboard an hour a day

does not predicate an action of its subject. Similarly,

[C]₄] Paraffin melts in boiling water.

identifies a subject but, like grammatically reformulated [C]₂], also predicates a property of its subject that is not an action. Even if [C]₄], in turn, is grammatically reformulated in a more active voice as

[C]₄'] Boiling water melts paraffin.

it still does not predicate an *action* of its subject, but rather an *effect*. Neither the subject of [C]₄] nor that of [C]₄'] denotes a substance, because both are merely impermanent effects in a series initiated by a first cause, rather than being first causes themselves.⁴

This shows how these two conditions, of being a substance and performing an action, are connected for Kant. When he says that an action is the sufficient empirical criterion of substance, he means to call our attention to the special ability of a synthetic judgment like [C]₃] to identify Piper as a substance *in virtue of* identifying her behavior as an action: If [C]₃] denotes an action, then Piper is a substance, i.e. a first cause. What enables us to recognize certain events as actions is their autonomy; and is therefore what distinguishes [C]₃] from [C]₂].

⁴ Thus most empirical substances are, on this analysis, effects, and not really substances at all. This is reflected in our use of the term "chemical agent" to refer to such an effect that itself effects further ones. The term "agent" here is derivative from and dependent for its meaning on its primary use, to denote a human (or divine) agent. Thanks to Patricia Kitcher and Paul Guyer for raising this point in discussion.

IV. HOW APPERCEPTION RESOLVES THE FIRST-/THIRD-PERSON ASYMMETRY

But what is the evidence on the basis of which we recognize the autonomy of third-personally observed action? We have already seen that an action, for Kant, is an effect both of nature and of freedom (KrV, A 543. 15-16). But we have also seen that an effect of freedom is the effect of a motivationally effective intentional resolve; of the “acts and inner determinations” of pure apperception that cause sensory-motor behavior governed by the synthetic rule of intention, of which [C]₁ is an instance. The strictly grammatical third-person analogue of [C]₁ would be

[C]₅ Piper will practice piano an hour a day.

[C]₅ replicates literally the prediction embedded in [C]₁. But what kind of prediction could possibly function as a cause of the action it predicts?

One possibility is that the attribution to Piper of practicing an hour a day in the future is the attribution of an empirical *disposition* to do so that may be activated by some local environmental determinant, such as a piano. This would treat an empirical disposition as an internal structural property of the agent denoted by the corresponding prediction; as a kind of prediction that is structurally embedded in the agent. But this explanation will not do, because it implies that the action is a mere effect of the empirical disposition plus its activating stimulus. It therefore does not satisfy the requirement of Kant’s action-as-first-cause argument of the Second Analogy, that the attribution of action discourage our inquiry into the potentially infinite backward regress of causes of such a disposition. On the contrary: a mere empirical disposition to act in a certain way invites further regressive inquiry into what instilled it – a teacher, hypnotist, programmer, social environment, or gene, perhaps.

A better candidate for a prediction that can function as a cause of the action it predicts is the prediction embedded in the agent’s own *intentional resolve* to perform that very action, the prediction the agent himself makes by intending to act. If, as we have already seen, the rule-governed “acts and inner determinations” of pure apperception can cause action in accordance with the intentional resolve that governs them, then agent S performs act A *because* S intended to A. This alternative respects both the requirements of Kant’s double-sided analysis of intention, and also the third-person representation of the act one predicts one will perform as a consequence. It also defeats the infinite backward regress of causes, by replacing it with a finite backward regress of reasons reaching back only to what Kant calls the unconditioned Idea of freedom. Thus our attribution to Piper of practicing an hour a day in the future contained in [C]₅ is our attribution to Piper of an intention to do so. And in her actual behavior we third-personally recognize the causal operation of this intention as being the same kind of antecedent

cause – an intelligible, rational cause – that operates similarly on each one of us in the first-person case.

Of course this intelligible antecedent cause is not itself among the empirical events we observe in the world. And there are many cases in which the *content* of the intention we ascribe to another may well be nothing but a subjective projection of our own interests or biases. But the simple recognition of his behavior *as intentional* picks out an actual, empirical quality of that behavior that is independently verifiable. It implies that there is actually something there in the behavior to recognize. The thing we recognize in another's behavior is the same thing we have already synthesized first-personally as the intelligible antecedent cause of our own behavior, namely the first-person prediction that we will perform it.

Consider, for example, the difference between my cat Kali and my colleague Jörg. Kali may seem at first glance to be purposefully engaged in the extended daily ritual of cleaning her fur. But that ritual is repeatedly interrupted by her reaction to every sound, every movement, every tactile or sensory stimulus she experiences. She is a paragon of heteronymous behavior.⁵ Jörg, by contrast, stubbornly persists in carrying out his intention to complete a draft of his article within the next 48 hours regardless of any such stimuli. I can detect the difference between Kali and Jörg because I recognize Jörg's manner of behaving from my own case. It is unlikely that Kali can detect the relevant difference between herself and us. Only those empirical objects that are similarly animated have the internal resources necessary for recognizing intentionality, and therefore autonomy, in one another. Thus pure apperception resolves the first-/third-person asymmetry because the synthetic rule it applies for identifying action is the same in the first- and third-person cases.

[C]₅] is then in need of a small but significant syntactical modification:

[C]₅' Piper will(s) to) practice piano an hour a day.
[C]₅' better expresses the dual character of intention in the third person case. It both includes the prediction of [C]₁], and also expresses the way in which that prediction acquires causal efficacy when formulated by its "*a priori* acting cause," i.e. its acting substance. [C]₅' is a third-person ascription of a first-person state, namely an intention, to such a substance. It instantiates the

⁵ - as Kant himself would be, if he rose from his chair *each time* a visitor appeared at the door, rather than only when *certain* visitors appeared at the door. In the former case, the mere appearance of a visitor at the door would be a sufficient empirical cause of his rising from his chair. In fact, Kant's intention to entertain only a very select few of them would have disposed him to send Lampe to deal with the unwanted ones. I am grateful to Leslie Stevenson for this example.

subjective principle of will – the principle of autonomy – which we detect in observed action.

Thus [C]₃] denotes a genuine action because we understand it as the effect of [C]₅']; and this judgment, too, conforms to the rules of synthesis listed in the Table of Categories. [C]₅' is the antecedent and [C]₃] the consequent in the following hypothetical synthetic judgment:

[H]₁] If Piper wills to practice piano an hour a day, then Piper practices piano an hour a day.

[H]₁], in turn, instantiates the “pure derivative concept” of action under the category of causality:

[H]₂] If S wills to perform A, then S performs A.

We identify all and only those empirical events as actions which we can understand similarly as effects of intention. This is the rule of synthesis⁶ by which we recognize A as an action, namely as the effect of will; the rule we as subjects reveal in our own action, and which we ascribe to other human agents whom we observe in action, such that from it we may, indeed, “assess the subjective principles of [their] will (KrV, A 549.18-21).”⁷

⁶ Note: not “inference.” The rule of inference for empirically identifying substances on the evidence of their actions would reverse antecedent and consequent in [H]₁] and [H]₂], as KrV, A 205.09f. above requires. But the synthetic function of recognition in a concept is not an inferential one.

⁷ An earlier draft of this paper under the title, “Kant’s Transcendental Analysis of Action,” was delivered at the Transcendental Philosophy Conference at Manchester Metropolitan University in April 2009. Thanks to that audience for stimulating discussion and to Graham Bird for very useful comments.