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Kant on *de se*

Since the classic works by Castañeda, Perry and Lewis, *de se thoughts* have been described as thoughts about oneself *as oneself*. In recent years, various theoretical perspectives have gained ground, and even if the transcendental system does not seem to contemplate an explicit articulation of *de se thoughts*, apparently a few features of transcendental apperception and *I think* do anticipate a few points in Perry and Recanati's claims on the so-called *implicit de se thoughts* in the specific terms of Transcendentalism.

1

Since Russell onward to the current debate between *descriptivism* and *singularism*,¹ which involves both philosophy of mind and language, the intuitive difference between descriptive thoughts about a particular object or individual (e.g. "The strongest man in the world can lift 150 kg") and the so-called *non-descriptive* or *de re thoughts* (e.g. "that man is drunk"), based on a relationship of acquaintance, can be immediately grasped on account of the different nature and role of the respective modes of presentation in play.² Based on a reconsideration of Russell's notion of *acquaintance* through Evans's neo-Fregean lesson, which explicitly takes into account *non-descriptive modes of presentation*, in *de re* thoughts the individual or object to which the thought refers is determined by a demonstrative mode of presentation specified through a relation of information-perception linking the object with the occurrence of the thought.³

Descriptive representations represent their referents through the properties they instantiate, their reference being determined by the existence of whatever may satisfy such properties. Instead, *non-descriptive* representations represent their referents through a contextual relation linking the occurrence of a thought with the object at issue. In this context, and due to their indexical nature, *non-*

1 *New Essays on Singular Thought*. Ed. Robin Jeshion. Oxford 2010.

2 Bach, Kent: *Thought and Reference*. Oxford 1987.

3 Recanati, François: *De re and De se*. In: *Dialectica*, 63/3 (2009), 249 – 269, 252.

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descriptive representations are *token-reflexive* and, as such, present two semantic levels.

Resuming Frege's idea that "every one is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else",⁴ Perry and Recanati describe *de se* thoughts as special cases of *de re* thoughts.⁵ A *de se* thought is nothing but a *de re* thought whose object is the same thinking subject who has produced the thought at issue; this type of thought rests on a special relation of *acquaintance* between the subject and its own self through a first-person mode of presentation, referred to by Recanati as *EGO mode of presentation*, and by Perry as *self files*, i.e. the *mental particular* by which the subject acquires first-person information. Obviously, one may also formulate accidental *de se thoughts*, namely *de re* thoughts about oneself involving neither first-person mode of presentation nor awareness that the subject to whom its thought is referring is the subject itself. Castañeda, Kaplan and Perry's examples are well-known.

According to Recanati, (a) *de re* thoughts may concern (a.1) someone other than oneself or (a.2) oneself. In the latter case, i.e. with *de se* thoughts, these can be either (a.2.1) accidental or (a.2.2) genuine, also widely referred to as *I-thoughts*. In turn, genuine *de se* thoughts can be (a.2.2.1) explicit and grounded on an identification component, once again explicitly represented in thought, as in Kaplan's example of a subject who identifies himself in a mirror with the man whose pants are on fire.

De se thoughts may also be *implicit* and based on *identification-free self-reference*. As such, they are *immune to error through misidentification* relative to first person, as opposed to thoughts involving an explicit self-identification.⁶ Several

⁴ Frege, Gottlob: *The Thought: a Logical Enquiry*. In: *Philosophical Logic*. Ed. Peter F. Strawson. Oxford 1967, 17–38, 25f.

⁵ Perry, John: *Thought without Representation*. In: *Supplementary Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 60 (1986), 137–152. Perry, John: *Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self*. Indianapolis 2002.

⁶ Due to the absence of identification components, some *singular judgments* involving self-ascriptions of mental and physical properties are *immune to error through misidentification* relative to the first-person pronoun. The subject formulating such judgments in given epistemic contexts cannot be mistaken as to whether it is she who is attributing a particular property to her own self. The issue is introduced by Wittgenstein – *The Blue and the Brown Books*. Oxford 1958, 66f. – in his philosophico-linguistic analysis of the grammatical rule of the term *I*: here he distinguishes two uses, the *use as object* ("I have grown six inches"), and the *use as subject* ("I have a toothache"), where no subject identification is taken into account. On this issue, see the classic discussions by Strawson (*criterionless self-ascription*) – *The Bounds of Sense. An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. London 1966, 165; Shoemaker (*self-reference without identification*) –

authors, since Shoemaker onward, have observed that in this particular type of *de se* thoughts, the subject is not represented as a constituent in the content of thought, but rather serves as a circumstance of evaluation for the judgment at issue. In other words, a *de se* thought does not express a complete proposition ascribing a property to the thinking subject, but simply arises from a representational content expressing the instantiation of that property. This is to say that thinking such a content also implies the self-ascription of the property expressed by the content of the *de se* thought.

Accordingly, not all *de se* are *de re* thoughts, as this applies only to (a.2.2.1) explicit *de se* thoughts; on the contrary, as just said, (b) *implicit de se* thoughts do not fall under the class of *de re* thoughts precisely because the subject is not a *res* that can be made the object of a representational relation. Therefore, the subject is not represented in the *de se* thought; only the properties instantiated in the experiential dimension are.

2

Bearing in mind the different philosophical approaches, there is no doubt that the *de se* thoughts perspective discussed so far is particularly attractive since some features of transcendental apperception and *I think* seem to anticipate some points of this approach, especially as regards a basic typology of implicit *de se* thoughts not yet introduced in the present discussion, as will be explained soon.

In a famous passage, Kant introduces the principle of *transcendental unity of apperception*:⁷ this fragment marks the *incipit* of the *B-Deduction* and condenses two important points for this discussion that have been widely tackled by leading commentators. The first has a more general scope and concerns single representations: in order to represent something for a subject, the subject must be able to think that every representation is its own. Obviously, the point here is not that *de facto* representations are accompanied by the *I think*, but the necessity of the possibility of representation self-ascriptions. With respect to this, Ameriks speaks of a *personal quality* assigned to individual representations so that these can present the form (E): *I think that x, I think that y, I think that*

Self-reference and self-awareness. In: *Journal of Philosophy*, 65/19 (1968), 555–567; Evans, Gareth: *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford 1982, 220.

7 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 131f.

z.⁸ Similarly, Carl speaks of the ability to make judgments from the first-person point of view.⁹

The second point concerns the set of representations accounting for a complex thought based on synthetic unity: the different representations merge into one single consciousness as a thought ascribable to a subject, i.e. (T) *I think* that (*I think* that x, *I think* that y, *I think* that z, etc.).¹⁰ Not only must the uses of *I* be co-referential – the *I* thinking x must be identical to the *I* thinking y, and so on – but the identity of *I think* must also concern the higher-ranking *I think* (here outside parentheses), upon which lies the synthesis of various representations in a single complex thought.

Taken together, these two points set up the necessary synthetic unity of apperception, whereby “the components of a complex thought must be connected in such a way as to allow for the possibility of their ascription to a single thinking subject, which entails that they constitute a synthetic unity”.¹¹ In this way, in another famous excerpt, Kant asserts that the analytical unit of apperception presupposes synthetic unity, i.e. the consciousness of the *I think* identity requires not only a synthesis but also a consciousness of the synthesis identity.¹²

Within deduction, all this should be linked to the relations between synthesis, representations and object on the one hand, and between apperception, judgment and intellect on the other, specifying the categories as conditions of possibility of knowledge. The intellect is the faculty of knowledge through concepts, while the object is what is given through the synthesis of the manifold in intuition on a conceptual basis. The union of representations *via* conceptual synthesis would not exist without the unity of apperception, which refers them to a given object in such a way as to establish their objective validity.¹³

The unification of representations should also be linked to the faculty of judgment, seen as the faculty of applying rules, and articulated according to the well-known distinction between objective and subjective unity of consciousness. While the objective unity of consciousness presupposes the use of catego-

8 Ameriks, Karl: *Kant and the Self: A Retrospective*. In: *Figuring the Self: Subject, Absolute, and Others in Classical German Philosophy*. Ed. David Klemm, Günter Zöller. New York 1997, 55–72, 58.

9 Carl, Wolfgang: *Apperception and spontaneity*. In: *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 5/2 (1997), 147–163, 153.

10 Ameriks, Karl: *Kant and the Self*, 58.

11 Allison, Henry: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism. Revised and Enlarged Edition*. New Haven/London 2004, 178.

12 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 134.

13 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 137.

ries and allows for the manifold given in intuition to be unified in the concept of an object, the subjective unity of consciousness is merely a product of reproductive imagination. Kant rejects the logicians' definition of judgment as the representation of a relation between two concepts because it does not specify what such a relation amounts to. It is the copula that specifies the relation of judgment in terms of what links representations to the objective unity of apperception so as to convert them into objective knowledge: the act of judgment, seen as spontaneity of the subject, is the very condition of synthesis. In this picture, the operation of the intellect which links the representational manifold to the unity of apperception is given by the logical function of judgments determining the manifold in empirical intuition. Categories are functions of judgment by which the manifold is determined; it follows that as long as the manifold is linked to the synthetic unit within one single consciousness, it is subject to categories.

I think is, thus, the formal condition of all thinking. *I* designates the transcendental subject, yet this subject is something general, unidentifiable from an epistemic point of view. As a consequence, the awareness of intellectual self-existence summarized by the *I think* representation accompanying every other representation does not display any property. Due to the absence of intuition, as a matter of fact it is not possible to determine whether that something does exist as a persistent substance in order to make knowledge.¹⁴ What is being assumed on the basis of the representation *I* is a mere existent devoid of any property. The subject is able to know that it exists as a thinking activity, but not what it is: the subject's being is inaccessible from an epistemic point of view, and what is given is nothing but thoughts regarded as its predicates, which cannot enable us to grasp the thinking subject's nature.

As a result, there emerge a few peculiarities of the self-referential apparatus involved in transcendental apperception: the subject is designated only transcendentially,¹⁵ the act of reference performed by the subject to refer to itself entails no mediation of knowing; in other words, it involves no identification through the properties ascribable to the subject. With the notion of *transcendental designation*, Kant anticipates some *self-reference without identification* features. The condition of possibility of all judgments relies on the *I think* act; at this level, the intellectual representation *I* is a simple representation, wholly empty of content and solely referring to something in general, namely to a tran-

14 Cf. Kant: KrV, B 157; B 278.

15 Cf. Kant: KrV, A 355.

scendental subject.¹⁶ An empty form, *I* designates but does not represent.¹⁷ Kant restates this point when he holds that “*I* is the general correlate of apperception designating, just as a mere prefix, a thing of undetermined meaning.”¹⁸

3

In sum, the general correlate of apperception *I* cannot be used to constitute a *de re* thought: the transcendental subject, seen as “this I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks” is not a *res* that can be made the object of a representational relation. While *I think* is the condition of every thought, *I* is no explicit representational reference within the content of a judgment: it designates only transcendently, and involves neither conceptual nor intuitional mediation. Two related issues arise with respect to this first result.

The first concerns the relationship between *I think* and the articulation of *de se* thoughts. If the act of spontaneity expressed by *I think* is necessarily involved in the making of a judgment, then it must reside at a much more abstract level than the reflection on the distinction between implicit and explicit *de se* thoughts. The Kantian arguments on *I think* cannot articulate the different types of *de se* thoughts expressing self-ascriptions of mental and physical properties because these regard the form and condition of possibility of any kind of judgment, regardless of the particular uses of *I* (as *subject* or *object*, in Wittgensteinian terms) involved in the single judgments produced. In other terms, the *I think* mechanism of transcendental designation cannot account for the presence or absence of the representational reference of the subject in judgments such as “I have grown six inches” (an *explicit de se* thought) or “I have a toothache” (an *implicit de se* thought) since such is the condition of possibility of both.

The issue becomes different in the case of a more fundamental, implicit *de se* thought. As we have seen, Recanati distinguishes *implicit* from *explicit self-ascriptions* according to the distinction between mode of representation and content of representation. The former concern all information gained through the *proprioceptive/kinaesthetic mode*: on the basis of her proprioceptive/kinaesthetic experience, if the subject judges her legs crossed, she cannot be mistaken as to the person to whom she ascribes the property of having her legs crossed. If the judgment is not made from the inside, and relies on the perception of the sub-

¹⁶ Cf. Kant: KrV, A 355.

¹⁷ Cf. Kant: KrV, A 381.

¹⁸ Kant: MAN, AA 04: 542.35 – 37.

ject's body in the mirror, she will see that her legs are crossed and may misidentify the person with crossed legs. In this latter case, the subject is explicitly represented in the content of the representation, whereas in the former she is not represented but implicitly determined by the mode. Hence, the statement is *identification-free*.

In spite of this difference, the author holds that the self is always an unarticulated constituent, whereas every (implicit or explicit) self-ascription presupposes, in turn, an *implicit self-ascription* of the propriety of thinking. One must therefore distinguish between a first level – in which the subjective dimension producing a thought is not represented as the producer of that thought¹⁹ – and a second level, where the subject can be implicitly or explicitly represented in the content of thought as the subject to whom a given property is attributed. Perry and Recanati's relativist perspective articulates such two levels in compliance with specific cognitive constraints, eliminating any explicit representation of the self and eventually reaching Perry's paradox that some *de se* attitudes should be considered *selfless*.

On the contrary, and although reaching the same result, in Kant the role of the *I*, seen as a correlative of apperception, is preserved as the basis of synthesis. As a matter of fact, Kant's perspective articulates these two levels according to a distinction between two classes of self-ascriptions: those taking *I as passive*, and those taking *I as active*.²⁰ Following Carl's epistemological perspective,²¹ which maps the distinction onto one between spontaneity and receptivity, while the former self-ascriptions are determined by representations given in sensibility in independent ways, the *I as active* is "the logical I",²² the bearer and ground of all judgments, the referent of all mental self-ascriptions expressing the act of judging one's given representations.

Here arises a second issue concerning the specific and, to some extent, controversial nature of the representational reference of *I* in judgments. On the one hand, *I think* must be able to accompany every representation, whereas *I* designates "this I, or He, or It (the thing) which thinks" only transcendently, without

19 On this particular point, Perry – *Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self*, 208 – expounds the "Tractarian or Carnapian way of making this point" holding that "the world as we perceive it does not include ourselves, but has ourselves as sort of a point of origin". As is well known, this is also, and above all, a Kantian issue, resumed *mutatis mutandis* by Schopenhauer, and, through him, Wittgenstein (cf. Frasca, Pasquale: *Understanding Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. New York 2007, 204f.).

20 Cf. Kant: Refl, AA 15: 80, R. 208; Kant: FM, AA 20: 270.

21 Carl, Wolfgang: *Apperception and spontaneity*, 157.

22 Kant: Anth, AA 07: 134.24f.

the intervention of any explicit egological representational reference in the judgment.

Ameriks already finds this feature in the above-mentioned first level of *one's own, not nothing for me* representations: “without any objective reflection on the self having taken place, the state [of awareness] is *structured* by the form ‘I think that x’, and therefore is already in a personal, even if implicit, sense an instance of ‘our’ consciousness”.²³ Every thought is in itself an instance of self-awareness, even when no subjective dimension is involved. As for the upper level concerning the function of synthesis, *I think*—seen as the representation of an act of spontaneity – is the bearer of all judgments which makes any thought possible. What is more, *I think* is considered a simple representation: in the absence of any identificative epistemic mediation, it merely designates the activity of thinking transcendently, as the nexus established by the copula in the judgment linking the representational synthesis on a conceptual basis with the synthetic unity of apperception.

In conclusion, to think is to unify the manifold conceptually; every thought expressed by a judgment is necessarily based on the principle of transcendental apperception. For this reason, Kant holds that *I* is implicit in the concept of thought itself,²⁴ determining the form of every judgment in general terms.²⁵ Hence, the *I* of apperception, seen as a ‘logically simple subject’, is analytically contained in the concepts of ‘thinking’ or ‘thoughts’ (des Denkens).²⁶ If *I* is the subject of thinking,²⁷ and if it is not represented except in the form of the judgment established by the synthetic unit of apperception, in the specific terms of Transcendentalism every thought is an *implicit de se thought*.

²³ Ameriks, Karl: *Kant and the Self*, 63.

²⁴ Cf. Kant: KrV, B 132.

²⁵ Cf. Kant: KrV, B 406.

²⁶ Cf. Kant: KrV, B 407f.

²⁷ Kant: Anth, AA 07: 134.24f.