

Transcendental Ontology and Apperceptive Idealism

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Pippin's outstanding work on Hegel has shaped the intellectual environment of Hegel readers in my generation.¹ I was educated in a context (in Heidelberg) where Henrich's and Pippin's influence constituted the hermeneutic norms of respectable approaches to the Hegelian corpus. This means that I wholeheartedly agree with the thrust of Pippin's way of looking at the issue of idealism in Hegel as shaped by Kant's insight that "pre-critical metaphysics" fails on the level of accounting for its own activity of theory-construction.² The move from substance to subject – to borrow Hegel's famous phrase from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – consists in fully recognizing that the thinker of philosophical thoughts should never eliminate herself from the broadest possible view of what there is and of what it is to be anything at all.

To be sure, Hegel does not claim that we should replace a pre-critical notion of reality as substance (an object or domain of objects "out there" to be discovered by and mirrored in thought directed at it) by a strictly Kantian transcendental idealism which bars us from cognizing things in themselves. This corresponds to his "insight (Einsicht)" that everything hinges on whether we uphold a position according to which it is possible "to grasp and express the true not as *substance* but equally as *subject* [das Wahre nicht als *Substanz*, sondern eben so sehr als *Subjekt* aufzufassen und auszudrücken." (TWA 3:23)

Remarkably, Pinkard mistranslates Hegel's awkward grammatical structure "nicht __, sondern eben so sehr" as "not as *substance* but rather even more as *subject*", which seems to me an indication of a Kantian misunderstanding. In German "eben so sehr" means "equally" and not "even more." Hegel goes on to call for a "*self-restoring* sameness [sich *wiederherstellende* Gleichheit]" (ibid.) of the two, which also speaks against the idea that he prefers subject to substance, so to speak.³ Hegel explicitly does not replace substance by subject, but sees them as being on a par.

On the basis of this observation, in my contribution I would like to challenge Pippin's Kantian reading by articulating some points of potential disagreement on the basis of wide shared agreement. Like Pinkard's translation Pippin also gives preference to subject over substance. Let me begin by granting that Pippin convincingly responded to many of his earlier critics by showing that he never questioned the presence of some kind of metaphysics in Hegel's *Science of Logic*.⁴ Ever since his groundbreaking *Hegel's Idealism* he indeed kept repeating that Hegel was deeply committed to "the founding principle of Greek and Western rationalism. To be is to be determinately intelligible." (t/s, p. XXX)

When I object to his "Kantian reading" I thereby do not mean to convey a false representation of Pippin's project which somehow charges him with an impositionist reading of Kant which would then be imposed on Hegel. I am aware of the fact that Pippin's very project on this level has always been to overcome any such interpretation of Kant first and Hegel second. Nevertheless, I think that Pippin overstates the contribution of Kant to Hegel and downplays Hegel's heavy and substantial criticism of the Kantian framework in favor of a strictly post-Kantian perspective which he shares with his fellow traveler Schelling regardless of their overall significant methodological disagreement.⁵

In order to begin articulating my sense of potential disagreement with Pippin on some core issues of reading Hegel, I would like to introduce a distinction between what I call "transcendental ontology" on the one hand and "apperceptive idealism" on the other hand.⁶ *Transcendental ontology* is the project to spell out a theory of reality (as a whole) that is controlled by the insight that no account of reality (as a whole) can ultimately be coherent if it does not put the fact of reality's intelligibility center stage. In a recent article, I introduced the concept of a "principle of intelligibility" as the core principle of *absolute idealism*, as I understand it. "This principle claims that a coherent conception of the world has to be compatible with the fact that we often get it right, which is not to say that there is nothing we somehow cannot know. Yet, the principle denies that there is anything inherent in the concept of the world which would make it reasonable to believe on a priori grounds that there are objects and facts beyond human ken." (Gabriel 2016, 187-8) Therefore, I disagree with Pippin's proposal to that "the self-conscious spontaneity of thought" (Pippin 1989, 207) is the idealist core principle.⁷ In this context, *apperceptive idealism* corresponds to Pippin's interpretation of Kant and Hegel, in particular, to his claim that apperception (spontaneity of thought) is at the heart of the idealist project.

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In order to account for the fact that we often get reality right – that, therefore, skepticism is unwarranted on all fronts – it is not sufficient to restrict our attention to the power of apperception in order to somehow guarantee a priori that we (implicitly) know what knowing is by being knowers of a special kind (spontaneous knowers). Pippin speaks of “Kant’s apperception requirement” according to which

“any judging is also the (non-intentional) consciousness of judging, judging must be implicitly a subscription to the requirements of any such judging [...], and more broadly, any act of claiming to know involves apperceptively an implicit awareness of *what knowing is*.” (t/s, p. XXX)

The extent to which Pippin thinks that Hegel subscribes to this “apperception requirement,” is probably the central source of disagreement between his reading of Hegel and the one I am proposing. On my reading, Hegel explicitly rejects an apperceptive reading of the notion of idealism and replaces it with a two-pronged strategy of making sense of the fact that we often get it right.

On the one hand, he argues that there is nothing inherent in the very concept of thinking that could erect “a sharp line separating cognition from the absolute.” (Pinkard’s translation of TWA 3:68) Yet, *pace* Pippin this need not mean that “any act of claiming to know involves apperceptively an implicit awareness of *what knowing is*.” One lesson of the Phenomenology of Spirit is an insight into the shortcoming of the very idea of intentional consciousness as a paradigmatic truth-bearer.⁸ To know is not paradigmatically to be in touch with a reality that transcends human thought. We are not subjects who try to get outside of their heads but who can never be sure to have managed to actually get in touch with how things really are. For any attempt to make sense of such an epistemic distance involves commitments to the structure of intentional consciousness that are already claims to knowledge concerning what there is. The decisive Hegelian (idealist) move at this point amounts to a full recognition of the existence of thinking (and therefore thinkers) in the domain of investigation of metaphysics and epistemology alike. We study ourselves as thinkers when attempting to figure out what the relation is between “cognition” and “the absolute.” But this does not mean that Hegel infuses intentional consciousness with special infallible powers associated with an implicit apperceptive awareness of knowing.

Hegel simply does not talk about knowledge claims in general in the Science of Logic, but enters a very peculiar situation, namely one where pure thinking

explores itself. In this context, we are subject to the most demanding norms of coherence, norms we can readily ignore in empirical cognition and knowledge claims concerning nature. This is why Hegel transitions from the Science of Logic into the philosophy of nature: like Aristotle he needs to remind us that we are not infinite thinkers engaged in thought thinking itself, but thinkers in touch with a reality not of their own making.⁹ This raises the demanding question how we can both be aware of our capacity for pure thinking and of our fallibility with respect to the non-intelligent parts of reality.

This is where transcendental ontology enters the picture in order to correct the picture of thinkers suggested by the Science of Logic. Remember that the Science of Logic is not Hegel's system, but only one part of it. It is not even the center. The system is not governed by the logic, but by absolute spirit, and thereby hangs a tale. What we need at this stage is less demanding than a reconstruction of the end of the Encyclopedia which is where the action is.¹⁰ We just need to remember that the Science of Logic introduces us into “the realm of shadows, the world of simple essences, freed from all sensory concretion” (my translation of TWA 5:55) a formulation which is a reference to a passage in *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* where Kant associates metaphysics with “the realm of shadows.”¹¹

Pure thinking cannot do justice to the requirement that we ought to move from substance to subject by respecting the partial independence of substance from pure thinking. For this reason, Hegel gives an account of the finite, i.e. of nature and subjective spirit, in order to close the circle of a transcendental ontology. Without giving an account of nature and finite embodied thinkers we cannot make sure that are in touch with how things are. For things cannot be reduced to the shadows of pure essences, which are the objects of logical thinking.

Actual embodied thinkers do not merely mirror or instantiate the “divine” thinking laid out in the Science of Logic. The *Realphilosophie* adds a whole new range of considerations into ontology/metaphysics in the sense of the discipline that deals with how things really are in the broadest possible sense of the term. How things really are cannot be completely assessed from the standpoint of “an account of all possible account giving” (Pippin 1989, 40). This is a lesson Hegel explicitly learned from Schelling's move beyond Kant and Fichte in his *Naturphilosophie*, a fact recognized by Hegel both in the Differenzschrift and by the maybe even more remarkable circumstance that for Hegel himself in his lectures on the history of philosophy Schelling (and not Kant!) is the culmination of philosophy before the Hegelian system.

He explicitly credits Schelling with going beyond Kant by recognizing “that nature is inasmuch a system of reason as knowledge [daß die Natur ebenso ein System des Vernünftigen ist als das Wissen].” (my translation of TWA 20:423) As is well known, the very idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit is heavily indebted to Schelling’s System of Transcendental Idealism. Unfortunately, this connection is massively ignored in the English-speaking world. One of the reasons for this remarkable absence is precisely the emphasis on a Kantian methodology which by Hegel’s light remains stuck within an account of the form of knowing (or judging, for that matter) that shies away from engaging metaphysical issues (such as solving the mind-body-problem) head-on.

Against this, Hegel praises Schelling for having re-introduced content and truth into philosophy.¹² To be sure, Hegel is dissatisfied by Schelling’s method. It would take us too far afield to make sense of Hegel’s critique of Schelling here. What is more important is that Hegel sides with Schelling when it comes to the importance of nature for any full account of thinking.

On my reading, this has the consequence that Hegel’s idealism must not be reduced to a contribution to the theory of judgment or pure thinking. Apperceptive idealism falls short of providing an adequate understanding of the very idea of Hegel’s system.¹³

At this point, it does not help to be more modest and claim that apperceptive idealism at least corresponds to the project of the Science of Logic, say. For without further ado it does not do justice to the realm of shadows either. Let us get straight to the heart of the matter, namely Hegel’s famous claim that the “*concept of the concept*” (TWA 6:252) is related to the “*I or pure self-consciousness*” (TWA 6:253).

Before making sense of what this could mean, let us take stock of what Hegel actually says in this passage. He does not simply identify the concept of the concept with Kantian apperception. Rather, he claims that the apperceptive I is the “*existence*” or “*Dasein*” of the concept. A couple of paragraphs later he establishes a connection between the concept and the “*nature of self-consciousness [Natur des Selbstbewußtseins]*” as well as the “*nature of the I [Natur des Ich]*” (TWA 6:255).

Here is a proposal for an inchoate reconstruction of this passage. There has to be some relationship or other between a thinker and her thought. Pippin (and recently Rödl) convincingly argue that it is not sufficient to rely on established locutions such as “*propositional attitude*” here. To be the thinker of a thought cannot be reduced to a structure where I grasp a given (Fregean) thought and take a stance towards it (such as believing, doubting, fearing etc. that p).

“According to this conception I possess notions and *the* Notion, just as I also possess a coat, complexion, and other external properties. Now Kant went beyond this external relation of the understanding, as the faculty of notions and of the Notion itself, to the *I*.”¹⁴

The *I* is not a representation of an object. Rather, it is itself a concept, namely the concept of what it is to grasp a conceptual structure. To grasp a conceptual structure (to have a thought) means to be capable of drawing on the thought content one is aware of. To think that *p* is to be in a position to relate *p* to some other content, say, *q*. This presupposes that *p* is not an undifferentiated unity of thought, but rather a thought with a structure, say, that *a* is *F* (to simplify, because Hegel does not believe that there is single standard form of a categorical judgment represented by a formula such as “*a* is *F*”). Hegel is not making an empirical claim about the psychology of thinkers here. He does precisely not ascribe the miraculous capacity to individual thinkers of empirical thoughts to be immediately (apperceptively) aware of what it takes to make knowledge claims in virtue of making them. Rather, he characterizes the highly specific situation in which we find ourselves as thinkers of philosophical thoughts about thinking. In this situation we are entitled to think of inference as drawing on judgments. If I infer that *a*'s being *F* sometimes entails that some other object, say, *b*, might also be *F*, means that I become aware of the fact that some predicates, such as *F*, do not pick out individual objects. If I know that Chicago is a city, I have good reasons to believe that some other object such as Paris can be a city too in the same sense in which Chicago is a city. Of course, this is not a logical thought. On the level of a logical thought I am however entitled to draw various distinctions represented by Hegel's permutation scheme of *A/B/E* (*Allgemeines/Besonderes/Einzernes*), which underlies his doctrine of the syllogism. As a thinker of pure logical thoughts, I have reasons to introduce different kinds of judgment. Not all judgments have the form that a given individual (an *Einzernes*) is general, which is just one case among many others to be found in Hegel's deduction of the forms of judgment.

As I engage in the activity of distinguishing different forms of judgment that can play roles in inferences, I learn something about the fact that I am the thinker of these thoughts. If I could not think of myself as judging, inferring, etc., I would be in position to become aware of the fact that I ought to infer some truth from some other truth by drawing on inferential connections. Rather, logical space would look

to me like a logical Humean mosaic. The world would like to me like nothing but “a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact just one little thing and then another.” (Lewis 1986, ix) But this is exactly an instance of an incoherent non-transcendental ontology. On any such Humean metaphysical picture, in reality, there is no room for thinking.

Logical space cannot have an atomistic structure. If it did, there would not even be judgments. Yet, this presupposes that the thinker of a thought and her thought do not belong to two domains, say, the domain of thinking and the domain of thinkables. This is why Hegel rightly overcomes Frege’s residual psychologism *avant la lettre* by showing that there is no gap between a Fregean realm of psychological “Vorstellungen” and the realm of Fregean thoughts that we somehow grasp without being able to make sense of this mysterious activity.¹⁵

The thinker of a thought plays a role in the individuation of the thought itself. The thinker’s capacity to infer something from something and more generally to establish logical connections among various thoughts. If *p* entails *q* (in some specified sense), I can become aware of the fact that I ought to believe that *q* in virtue of *p* being the case precisely because the thoughts hang together in this way in my thinking. My thinking is, thus, nothing “subjective” at all. It is the activity I engage in while realizing some truths or other about logical space itself.

Hegel does not describe the empirical thinker here. His claim is not that I (M.G.) are the thinker of the structure expressed by the Science of Logic. This is the shortcoming of logic! Logic alone cannot tell me what it is for me to be a thinker, as this involves concepts that are far from being reducible (let alone identical with) the concept of concepts. Hegel explicitly recognizes this in the passage under scrutiny here, as he reminds us that there are “steps [Stufen]” which are presupposed by logical thinking. The

*“form of these states is determined by the particular science under consideration. In our science, that of pure logic, these stages are being and essence. In psychology the antecedent stages are feeling and intuition, and then representation as such. In the Phenomenology of Spirit, which is the doctrine of consciousness, the ascent to the understanding is through the stages of sensuous consciousness and then perception.”*¹⁶

Hegelian logic is topic-neutral. The concept therefore is not restricted to self-consciousness, but equally present as a “*stage of nature* as well as of *spirit*” (Miller’s

translation of TWA 5:257). For this reason, apperceptive idealism on the level of logical thinking explicitly excluded “*space and time*” (TWA 6:257) from consideration as well as the “act of self-conscious understanding [Aktus des selbstbewußten Verstandes]” (ibid.).

This raises the question how Pippin integrates the metaphysical topic-neutrality of logic into his Kantian approach. If logical form is not restricted to self-conscious thinking in the sense of an activity of our mind, how exactly can we account for its presence in nature? From a strictly Kantian perspective, it is easier to think of logical form without falling into one of the many traps of so-called “psychologism,” whereas I agree with Schelling and Hegel that Kant’s solution to this problem (if any!) to the problem of “psychological idealism”¹⁷ stands in his way to conceive of absolute form’s manifestation in nature. Ever since Differenzschrift and Faith and Knowledge Hegel maintains that Kant falls short of overcoming the standpoint of subjective idealism even if interpreted in Pippin’s manner. The problem is precisely that Kant restricts logical form to thinking and thereby engenders a whole series of dualisms including one which conceptually opposes mind and nature. For this reason, Kant is a prime representative of what Hegel in Faith and Knowledge calls “philosophy of reflection”. Against this Hegel happily endorses the Schellingian notion that “life, or organic nature, is the stage of nature at which the concept emerges, but as blind, as unaware of itself and unthinking concept; as self-grasping it only pertains to spirit.” (Miller’s translation of TWA 6:257 slightly altered)

Let me pause and try to bring some clarity to the philosophical issues at stake here. On a Kantian picture, apperceptive idealism does not provide us with insight into how non-subjective reality (nature) is compatible with the emergence of thinkers. Hegel sides with Schelling in that he intends to make room for a metaphysical solution to the placement issue as to how mind fits into nature.¹⁸ Mind fits into nature because both fit into the logical space whose intelligibility is articulated in the Science of Logic. However, this does not mean that philosophy as a whole is logic. Logic is just one part of the system, namely the part dealing with pure thinking.

According to my overall reading of the Science of Logic, the transition from the logic into the philosophy of nature is motivated by the logic’s own insufficiency. Similar to the failure of intentional consciousness to give a coherent account of its own position with the true as a whole, the logic on my construal presents us with a series of mistakes concerning logical space. However, the mistakes are rational in the specific position they occupy. Allow me to illustrate this with reference to a toy

model of what is going on at the beginning of the Logic. “Being” is Hegel’s name for the identity of being and thinking. It corresponds to Hegel’s reading of Parmenides through Plato’s lenses, which involves complicated historical issues. Roughly, the idea is that we can first and foremost introduce a logical space without any occupants. In so doing, we abstract from any knowledge of logical relations we might already have explicitly acquired which corresponds to Hegel’s later notion that philosophy sets out from the “the free act of thinking” (Enc. § 17). Being is logical space emptied out by pure abstraction. At the same time, we can become aware of the fact that this corresponds to the notion of pure nothingness. If logical space were just a *singulare tantum* without any further object contained within it, we could make no rational move within it. Hence, we need more logical vocabulary in order to make sense of the fact that we performed the operation of abstraction in the first place to work ourselves back to the position which we already occupy as logical thinkers. The next step is to introduce a minimal “furnishing function” for logical space, as it were, namely the notion that something or other might occupy it. Something or other better be the case. From the standpoint of an empty logical space, there is no reason why something is the case at all, which is why it first appears in the form of becoming, a transition from nothing in particular to the insight that there better be some denizens in logical space.

This transition from being and nothing to becoming however does not concern pure thinking alone. Becoming does not merely take place in our thinking, as it were. There is no distinction we can draw between logical space and its inhabitants in such a way that natural objects, say, are ipso facto excluded from logical consideration. At the end of the Science of Logic we realize that there is not just one philosophical science, which is why the system is called the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences. The limitation of pure thinking is that its topic-neutrality cannot pass any a priori verdict on reality as a whole except for the insight that it does not per se resist conceptualization. In order to show that empirical concepts that deal with nature are able to locate nature within logical space, it is not sufficient to remain within the reach of pure thinking. Even the absolute idea, “is still logical, locked into pure thought, the science only of the divine *concept* [noch logisch, sie ist in den reinen Gedanken eingeschlossen, die Wissenschaft nur des göttlichen *Begriffs*]” (TWA 6:257). Like late Schelling, Hegel therefore opposes a purely rationalistic, “negative philosophy” to the extent to which we limit reason to forms of thinking. For this would aggravate our epistemic situation vis-à-vis the genealogy of thinking from within nature or make it impossible in principle to

address this issue in a meaningful way (a picture notoriously embraced by Fichte).

Apperceptive idealism is insufficient when it comes to accounting for our position as subjects in reality as a whole. For apperceptive idealism does not tell us anything about the role the concept plays in pre- and non-human nature. We ought not identify ourselves with the apperceptive I as this makes it impossible for us to understand that we are essentially rational animals and thus, among other things, products of nature. Yet, this does precisely not mean that there is a conceptual gap separating nature from thinkers. On the contrary, we are entitled to think of nature as compatible with the emergence of finite thinkers within it. Otherwise, we would wind up with an untenable form of skepticism concerning our capacity to grasp non-mental reality.

It seems to me that the project of transcendental ontology significantly goes beyond the ontologically modest form of apperceptive idealism suggested by Pippin's reading of Kant and Hegel. Reality as a whole for Hegel is the ultimate topic of philosophy in that we have to solve our metaphysical issues head-on and not relegate them to some other form of thinking (say art, religion or the natural sciences). Restricting philosophy to the activity of thought thinking itself or to the most general account of account giving creates a gap between other forms of thinking and philosophy. It is precisely this gap which constitutes modernity for Hegel and which he wants to overcome without resorting to what Pippin in his piece calls

“the *modern, rationalist* metaphysical tradition, the view that unaided pure reason could determine the existence and the nature of *supersensible entities*, with necessity: substances like *res cogitans*, monads, a monistic substance, or medieval concept realism. Kant, for Hegel, was right. There is no “thing metaphysics” or any metaphysics of another world, a beyond, a “*Jenseitsmetaphysik*.”” (t/s, p. XXX)

Be that as it may, I am not sure if I agree with Pippin's way of putting this. Clearly, Hegel is committed to supersensible entities. All logical categories in the Logic are supersensible entities in some sense. To be sure, Pippin has resources to spell out what exactly he is objecting too. I tend to side with him when it comes to the kind of first-order metaphysics (theory of the “furniture of reality”) ascribed to Hegel by some recent interpreters such as Robert Stern and James Kreines.¹⁹ However, there is room for middle-ground between a Kantian rejection of such metaphysics and a

reconciliation of Hegel with contemporary analytic metaphysics, ground I take to be occupied by a “nonstandard metaphysics,” as Koch calls this.

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Notes

- ¹ For my own engagement with Pippin see in particular Gabriel/Zizek 2009a, Gabriel 2010, and Gabriel 2011.
- ² For a full defense of this see Gabriel 2019.
- ³ See Pippin's comments on substance vs. subject in Pippin 1989, 175.
- ⁴ See, for instance, Pippin 2016.

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- ⁵ On the Schelling-Hegel-issue see my Aarhus Lectures Gabriel 2013, 2014, 2015a, 2016a.
- ⁶ See Gabriel 2011 and Gabriel 2016b.
- ⁷ Pippin's account of the meaning of "absolute idealism" seems to me exactly subjectivistic and Kantian in the sense to which Hegel officially objects. See Pippin 1989, 91, which culminates in the claim that "the Notion originally determines the possibility and character of human experience." However, I do not see how "human experience" plays any role in the Science of Logic. To be sure, Pippin adds that in "Hegel's final position" there is "no possible contrast between our conceptual framework and "the world"" (ibid.), which comes closer to the standpoint of a transcendental ontology I identify as Hegel's starting point in the Logic justified by the Phenomenology of Spirit's vindication of absolute knowing.
- ⁸ On this see my engagement with Pippin in Gabriel 2017.
- ⁹ For an account of thought thinking itself in Aristotle see Gabriel 2009b.
- ¹⁰ Pippin expresses doubts concerning the defensibility of "the major direction of his [Hegel's] Realphilosophie" (Pippin 1989, 259f.), but does not give any reasons for this avowal.
- ¹¹ Kant 1998, 936: "Der Initiat hat schon den groben an den äußerlichen Sinnen klebenden Verstand zu höhern und abgezogenen Begriffen gewöhnt, und nun kann er geistige und von körperlichen Zeugen enthüllte Gestalten in derjenigen Dämmerung sehen, womit das schwache Licht der Metaphysik das Reich der Schatten sichtbar macht."
- ¹² See TWA 20:430: "In der Schellingschen Philosophie ist so auch wieder der Inhalt, die Wahrheit, zur Hauptsache geworden, wogegen in der Kantischen Philosophie das Interesse sich besonders so ausgesprochen hat, daß das Wissen, das Erkennen, das subjektive Erkennen untersucht werden sollte; es ist als plausibel erschienen, daß man das Instrument, das Erkennen, zuerst untersuche."
- ¹³ Paradigmatically represented by Rödl 2018. It is hard not to see Rödl's account as a contemporary echo of Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre.
- ¹⁴ Miller's translation of TWA 6:254: "Nach dieser Vorstellung habe ich Begriffe und den Begriff, wie ich auch einen Rock, Farbe und andere äußerliche Eigenschaften habe. – Kant ist über dieses äußerliche Verhältnis des Verstandes als des Vermögens der Begriffe und des Begriffes selbst zum Ich hinausgegangen."
- ¹⁵ On Frege's residual psychologism see Gabriel 2015b, chapter 13.

- ¹⁶ Miller's translation of TWA 6:256 slightly corrected.
- ¹⁷ TWA 6:261. The problem is that "the Kantian philosophy has not got beyond the psychological reflex of the concept", "not because the categories themselves are only finite, but on the ground of a psychological idealism, because they are merely determinations originating in self-consciousness." (Miller's translation of TWA 6:261 slightly altered).
- ¹⁸ On this see Gabriel 2018.
- ¹⁹ Stern 2009, Kreines 2015.