

Apperception, Objectivity, and Idealism

© Dennis Schulting, 2020

In a key passage in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories in the A-edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant poses the following question:

What does one mean ... if one speaks of an object corresponding to and therefore also distinct from the cognition? (KrV, A104)¹

One would think that it is obvious to suppose that the object of which we claim knowledge, which corresponds to it, exists independently and regardless of that claim. The being of the object does not depend on our knowledge and must therefore be strictly distinguished from it. But Kant's question goes beyond distinguishing between the necessary conditions under which we can claim knowledge of an object and the ostensibly quite separate question concerning the constitutive or ontological conditions for the independent existence of the object. This distinction reflects the traditional distinction between an epistemological question, which concerns knowledge, and a metaphysical question, which concerns the being or existence of things. Kant asks a more fundamental question: What do we actually mean by 'object'? This question goes beyond both a purely metaphysical and a purely epistemological question because it is precisely about determining what we mean by the notion 'object' before we can even formulate any specific knowledge claims about an arbitrary object and assess their truth conditions.

In his analysis in the Deduction, Kant wants to make visible something more formal that would remain implicit if we were to take the object too concretely, as merely an empirically given thing that presents itself to us. If we were to consider the object merely as an empirically given thing we would never be able to gather more than random information about it. This formal aspect concerns the way in which we *relate* to an object at all. To make this element visible, we must take

¹ All translations from the KrV are from Kant (1998).

a certain reflective distance from the concrete object we experience. The *concept* of ‘object’ itself already expresses a certain reflexiveness, as Kant suggests (cf. KrV, A103–4). In his analysis in the Deduction Kant highlights this reflexive element, in order to be able to elucidate what it actually means to talk about an object and, in a more concrete sense, in fact first to be able to have experience of it and make judgements about it.

What is revealed in such a formal analysis is what Kant understands by the so-called transcendental conditions of possibility for both the experience of an object and the object of experience, namely the conditions that govern the domain of possible experience. He links this to the possibility of synthetic a priori judgements, judgements that are neither purely analytical, and whose truth can be deduced from the analysis of the concepts contained therein, nor a posteriori empirical judgements. These synthetic a priori judgements are not concrete judgements in the usual sense of the word, but express the fundamental principles that make it possible to speak of an object of experience in the first place, to judge about it. They are principles that play in the background of our ordinary judgements of experience. These synthetic a priori judgements declare that under certain rules that Kant names categories objects can be known *as* objects, and at the same time these categories are constitutive of the object itself, *qua* object. Kant writes at the beginning of the Analytic of Principles:

In this way synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, if we relate the formal conditions of *a priori* intuition, the synthesis of imagination, and its necessary unity in a transcendental apperception to a possible cognition of experience in general, and say: The conditions of the *possibility of experience* in general are at the same time conditions of the *possibility of the objects of experience*, and on this account have objective validity in a synthetic judgment *a priori*. (KrV, B197/A158)

To return to the above-cited passage from the A-Deduction, Kant answers the question as follows:

It is easy to see that this object must be thought of only as something in general = X, since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it. (KrV, A104)

Kant denies here that the object of which we claim knowledge is given outside of our cognition. Instead, the object of knowledge is only ‘something in general = X’. In a sense, the object of knowledge is internalised in thought, that is, it is a function of thought. In the following passage, Kant indeed repeats that we are dealing only with our representations and that the ‘X which corresponds to them (the object)—because it [i.e. the object] is something that should be distinct from our representations—is nothing for us [and] the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing other than the formal unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of the representations’ (KrV, A105, translation emended). He continues: ‘Hence we say that we cognize the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition.’ The questions that arise are: What is correspondence? How is distinction taken account of? To what extent does a correspondence theory of truth still play a role in Kant? I cannot deal with these questions here, but it seems clear that for Kant correspondence between representation and object should not be understood as a relation of some sort between an absolutely inner self and an absolutely externally given object.

The claim that an object is when we have effected a unity among our representations does not mean to say, however, that the thing that we know something objective about is also ‘generated’ by our thinking, by the unity of consciousness, in terms of its existence. The thing that, insofar as it is an object of experience, is *as an object for* the knower and is ‘something in general = X’, is itself, *qua* existing in itself, of course not internalised. As is well-known, Kant makes a distinction between the appearance of a thing and the thing in itself. It is the *appearance* of a thing that Kant identifies with the *object* of knowledge. We can know only the appearance of a thing, and not the thing in itself, which remains independent of the knowing subject (I shall come back to this distinction later on). Objects are therefore in some very specific sense distinct—at least conceptually, if not numerically—from things in themselves. The traditional conception of true knowledge is that our true judgements about things actually correspond to the things that are independent of our judgements, therefore have an *itself-nature* independently and regardless of our judgements (which is expressed in the correspondence theory of truth). How else could our judgements be true of things if they did not correspond to the things as they are in themselves?

Importantly, Kant is not so much interested in the question of truth *per se*, that is to say, the standard question of the logical conditions under which a certain judgement *a is F* is true or false, or what the truth value of our judgements is, nor in the question about which other necessary but non-logical conditions must be met so that a certain judgement is true. He is rather interested in a deeper

aspect of the relation between judgement and the object of judgement, whereby judgement should be interpreted here as a synthetic judgement.² He therefore speaks of the question of *transcendental* truth. What makes it possible for me to attribute, truly or falsely, a predicate *a* to an underlying object, the ‘X’ that Kant speaks of in the above-quoted passage in A104 (and by means of *a* also another predicate *F*, *G*, etc.)? What is at issue here is the primordial *relation to the object* as such in any arbitrary judgement about an arbitrary given object or objective event, namely the original orientation to the object or object-directedness—regardless of the question whether attributing any arbitrary predicates *a* and *F* to any object leads to a true or false judgement about same object. This deeper relation to the object, which is indicated by the adjective ‘transcendental’, expresses the *objective validity* of an arbitrary empirical judgement about a given object. Objective validity is the fundamental ground that enables us first to make a (true or false) judgement about a given object at all. For Kant, therefore, objective validity is the characteristic of judgement as such.³

But what exactly is it that determines objective validity? How does objective validity come about if it does not lie in the correspondence per se between, on the one hand, judgement or our understanding, and, on the other hand, the thing that is to be distinguished from it and that has an independent existence in itself, let alone that the object or thing itself is the so-called truthmaker? And does the uncoupling of objective validity as the fundamental orientation to the object from the traditionally conceived correspondence relation between intellect and thing not precisely lead to a gap between our conceptuality and reality? Does Kant’s approach to the question of truth as representation-internal not run the risk of a hopeless idealism, whereby we are locked into our own ideas and our own mental ‘reality’? In other words, isn’t there the risk of an epistemological relativism, whereby only our own ideas and judgements are objective, and the ‘really real’ cannot be reached?

In Schulting (2017), against the background of current discussions in contemporary analytical Kant research, I argued that Kant is a radical subjectivist in the sense that the objective application rules for our concepts are purely a function of the capacity to judge, given the fact that we are sensory beings who receive impressions from the outside, from the things themselves. Our sensibility is of course a necessary condition of possible empirical knowledge of objects, but

² With analytic judgements the relation to an object, an underlying *x*, is otiose because irrelevant for assessing whether the judgement is true or false.

³ Kant provides the definition for judgement in KrV, B142; there he explicitly connects objective validity with the nature of judgement. But it should be noted that this concerns determinative judgements, not non-determinative, merely-reflective judgements, such as aesthetic judgements, of which Kant speaks in the third *Critique*, nor analytic judgements, for which reference to an underlying object is irrelevant to the understanding of their truth.

sensibility is not determinative in the sense Kant means; only our capacity to judge determines what knowledge and an object of knowledge is. The radical-subjective element lies, more specifically, in the fact that our capacity to judge is defined by what Kant calls transcendental apperception. Apperception is the principle of self-awareness and makes it possible for me to be aware of *myself* as the person who has certain representations. But apperception is not merely the principle of self-awareness, as if this should be seen in contrast to the consciousness of *objects*.

The radical claim that Kant makes—and which I explain in detail in my books (Schulting 2017, 2018a, 2021)—is the claim that the act of transcendental apperception, which is an act of the synthesis of all my representations, does not concern the apprehension of a random series of representations that I happen to have (more accurately, which are occurrent in the mind). Rather, transcendental apperception establishes the objective unity among those representations that I regard *as* mine. The rules for a priori synthesis that enable such an objective unity among my representations are the categories. The categories are the various, very general modes—twelve to be exact—in which that unity among my representations obtains, in such a way that these representations are identical to each other insofar as they count as all *my* representations qua combined, namely those representations that I apprehend *as* mine. Kant calls this unity the original synthetic unity of apperception, which is the unity of the thinking subject that takes a series of representations together *as* his own. Kant speaks of this act of apperception as an act of accompanying by the ‘I think’. The unity of the act of apperception is the original ground of unity among representations that are accompanied by this ‘I think’.

The identity of this thinking subject, the ‘I’ of the ‘I think’ that unites its representations, is at the same time the identity of the whole of unified representations accompanied by the same subject. This unified whole of representations forms a *something*, an object in general, *for* that subject. What is termed ‘object’ thus lies in the way in which the thinking subject takes his representations as an identical whole that is as an object for that same subject. That is why Kant calls the transcendental unity of apperception an *objective* unity of apperception, and why he defines object as ‘that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united’ (KrV, B137): the unity of apperception maps exactly onto the unity of the manifold in the intuition. There is an element of necessity or invariance in the act of apperception that is not already contained in the flow of the separate representations as such (cf. KrV, A107). This element ensures that the representations are not merely subjectively valid representations of an arbitrary representer. Because it is a necessary connection between representations, the objective unity of apperception, which

expresses the unity of the twelve categories of experience, is always the unity of a thinking subject's judgement, which has the basic character of *a is F*—in contrast to a contingent sequence of variant, separate representations that any representer might have. For Kant, the thinking subject is always the judging, cognising, self-conscious subject. The objective unity of apperception is therefore the definition of judgement, and expresses the unity of the predicates *a* and *F* in relation to the underlying object that the judgement *a is F* is about. In short, the objective unity of apperception in a judgement in fact defines what an object is, qua that in which predicates *a* and *F* are united. This expresses the fundamental, intimate identity relation between thought and object, between judgement and object, without there having to be an inexplicable relation that is external to an object outside of its representation.

But how can an identity relation between thought and object in a judgement establish the relation to a real *empirical* object? Kant makes a fundamental distinction between the intuition of an object, which expresses the immediate relationship to the given object, and the concept which relates to the object only *by means of* such a intuition. But as we have seen, in Kant's view, the relation to the object is representation-internal; the object is nothing outside of our knowledge to which that knowledge should correspond. Yet the objective unity of apperception is the condition of possibility only for the object *qua* object, that is, it constitutes its objectivity. It does not constitute the object with respect to its existence (cf. KrV, A92/B125). That would in fact be impossible because it would mean that thinking would generate the reality of an object in an existential or factual sense. The condition of real possibility for knowledge, that which makes knowledge true empirical knowledge, experience (KrV, B147), lies in sensibility, because only empirical intuition provides a direct sensory relation to the really existing object.

On the other hand, the intuition itself is also only a representation, or a bundle of representations (sensory impressions), which, although having a direct relation to the real thing of which we have a representation (the *x* of a judgement), are not identical to that thing. We must differentiate between, on the one hand, the distinction between representation and represented and, on the other hand, the distinction between representation/represented and the thing in itself, namely the thing with all its possible predicates (in a judgement we can attribute only a limited amount thereof to the thing judged about). Kant's Copernican turn—which states that in order to analyse the possibility of knowledge we no longer take the correspondence relation to be directed from mind to thing, but instead must take things as they conform to us, to our forms of knowledge—applies both to the intuition, the form of our sensibility, and to the concept, the form with which our mind works.

Although the intuition thus establishes the immediate, as yet indeterminate relation to the real existing thing, the *determined* relation remains representation-internal.

Here it is important to see that transcendental apperception works both ways: it establishes unity among concepts, on the one hand, and among representations in intuition, on the other, and this happens simultaneously *in* judgement in virtue of one and the same determining act of synthesis (the act of apperception) that is performed by the judging agent, for example in the judgement *This armchair is Prussian-blue-coloured*. The predicates \langle *this armchair* \rangle and \langle *Prussian-blue-coloured* \rangle are connected in this judgement by the ‘copula’ (*Verhältniswörtchen*)—as Kant calls it—‘is’. But the copula ‘is’ says more than just stating that predicates are linked to each other. For a judgement always also has a modal element; it is not just a proposition. The copula says something about the existence of the object about which a judgement is made. The predicates \langle *this armchair* \rangle and \langle *Prussian-blue-coloured* \rangle are also connected with an intuition of a particular existing thing that falls under the subject concept which, just in case the judgement is true, has the characteristics of being an armchair and being Prussian-blue-coloured. In the judgement I thus perceive the existing thing *as* the object with the objective properties that I attribute to it *in* the judgement. That object is, of course, from a purely empirical point of view the thing that exists independently and regardless of the judgement. But the object *qua* object, or *qua* the *determined* thing with such and such properties, is purely a function of judgement.

As we have seen, what is characteristic of Kant’s position is that our knowledge does not consist in a direct correspondence relation between concepts/intuition and thing. Whereas it is true that in Kant’s view empirically speaking a thing existing independently of the perceiving subject is presupposed as given for any true judgement—contrary to what many commentators think, Kant is not concerned with proving *that* such things or objects exist *de re*; he just takes their *de re* existence for granted—from a transcendental point of view there is nothing beyond the judgement, that is to say, beyond the relation between concepts and the underlying intuition to which the judgement corresponds that determines the truth of my cognition. The objective validity of a judgement about a given object *o* is established only in virtue of the objective unity of apperception that connects concepts and intuition in the judgement about *o*; as Kant says, ‘we say that we cognize the object if we have effected synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition’ (KrV, A105), confirming that the unity of apperception defines the object in the way that we know it. This is the thesis that I have called Kant’s radical subjectivism, referring to what Kant himself says, in the A-Deduction, where he speaks about nature as a ‘whole of appearances’ (*Inbegriff von Erscheinungen*), namely all possible

objects of experience that can be found *only* ‘in the radical faculty [*dem Radikalvermögen*] of all our cognition, namely, transcendental apperception’, in ‘that unity on account of which alone it can be called object of all possible experience, i.e., nature’ (KrV, A114).

The objective validity of an arbitrary judgement about an empirical object is wholly constituted by the determining power of the judging, apperceiving subject that apprehends and synthesises his representations. This applies not only to the concepts in the judgement but also to the sensory representations in the underlying intuition. The same subject that combines the predicates <*this armchair*> and <*Prussian-blue-coloured*> at the same time combines the sensory perceptions of a particular thing, the armchair, to which these predicates are attributed in the judgement. Kant expresses this in such a way that the synthesis of the intuition must be seen as ‘the transcendental synthesis of the *imagination*’, whose faculty ‘is an effect of the understanding on sensibility and its first application ... to objects of the intuition that is possible for us’ (KrV, B152)—so the understanding itself, that is to say, the thinking subject that apperceives his representations, has, ‘under the designation [*unter der Benennung*] of a *transcendental synthesis of the imagination*’ (KrV, B153), an effect on sensibility, and thus it acts as a synthesis of the apprehension of representations in sensible intuition itself. In this way the identity relation between thought and object manifests itself as a relation that refers to an empirically perceived object, without it having to go beyond our representations.

It should be emphasised that what is, as it were, generated here by the judging subject is only the necessary form of the empirical judgement, namely the synthetic unity that combines both the concepts and the empirical intuitions—not the content of the judgement, namely the predicates themselves (in this case <*this armchair*> and <*Prussian-blue-coloured*>) and the sensory material as such that underlies the judgement and provides it real possibility; these are wholly contingent and dependent on all sorts of non-transcendental conditions.⁴ The form of judgement—the objective unity of apperception—is necessary in the sense that it is the necessary transcendental condition for the essential nature of a judgement as an objectively valid statement about an object or objective event. But it is also the sufficient condition for objective validity because the object is, in terms of its objectivity, a function of that form; or more precisely, the form, namely the objective unity of apperception, defines the object. Transcendental-logically speaking, the object does not exist

⁴ This should not be misunderstood as suggesting that the sensible material is not also determined in terms of its intensive magnitude, by the understanding, in judgement. But this still concerns the form of matter, i.e. matter *qua* matter, which is being determined as the necessary element of all objective knowledge, not the factuality or the characteristics of this or that particular sense impression, or this or that particular conceptual trait.

outside the judgement, outside apperception. This is what is radically subjective about Kant's position.

However, that does not mean, again, that the object depends on the judgement for its actual existence. As I indicated earlier, Kant makes a distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Appearances are things insofar as we can know them as an object of our knowledge, of our judgements. An appearance is, as Kant says, the indeterminate object of a sensible intuition (the 'x' which I mentioned earlier), and is identical to the object as a function of judgement insofar as that appearance is determined by the categories (also 'existence' is of course a category, but here a distinction must be made between the fact that something exists and establishing, in a judgement, in virtue of applying the category 'existence', the fact that something exists).

Kant's radical subjectivism thus implies an idealism with respect to the object as being in some sense dependent on our judging, but this is not the idealism of Berkeley, say, which denies the mind-independent existence of things in themselves. Kant's radical subjectivism ensures that we can explain the intimate correspondence between knowledge and object as a function of our own capacity to judge, namely the objective unity of apperception, and that at the same time things insofar as their existence is concerned are not reduced to being a function of our representations. Whereas Kant's subjectivism is thus characterised by both a metaphysical and epistemological component—metaphysical because not only the knowledge or experience of an object but also the knowable object itself is a function of transcendental apperception—the thing in itself retains its existential independence.

This in no way implies that our knowledge of objective reality is only relative because supposedly it would not reach the things in themselves—an oft-heard criticism, especially from Hegelians reading Kant.⁵ Such a conclusion ignores the fact that the object determined by the judging subject is the appearance of the thing itself, *for* that judging subject. Although the judging subject does not know the thing *as such*, namely independently of judgement, i.e. *in itself*, he does know the thing in the way in which it *appears* to him as an object. The fact that he does not know the thing as a thing in itself follows logically from the fact that knowledge of something is not possible apart from the necessary conditions under which such knowledge is first possible: For how can I judge of something that it is so and so *independently* of judgement? Things are therefore knowable if and only if they are subject to the necessary conditions for knowledge, and they are

⁵ Schulting (2021), ch. 9.

subject to those conditions only if and when they appear to us qua objects, not as things in themselves.

Knowledge of objects is thus possible only if the necessary a priori conditions for knowledge of objects are met; outside of those necessary a priori conditions knowledge is ex hypothesi not possible, nor are objects *of* knowledge, that is, objects *for* us, possible outside of those conditions. This means that things in themselves, that is, things as they are independently of the conditions under which alone they (as objects) can be known, cannot be known *as such* (as things in themselves) under the conditions under which alone objects can be known.⁶ Or, as Kant says in the foreword to the B-edition of the *Critique*, ‘we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them’ (KrV, Bxviii). This Copernican principle ensures that things in themselves retain their absolute independence. Does this mean that Kant’s theory of knowledge is relativist? Not at all. Such a question betrays a misunderstanding with regard to the transcendental question of how knowledge of an object is possible at all, how ‘object’ is defined, and what it means to make a judgement about an object.⁷

References:

Kant, Immanuel (1998), *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and ed. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schulking, Dennis (2017), *Kant’s Radical Subjectivism. Perspectives on the Transcendental Deduction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schulking, Dennis (2018a), *Kant’s Deduction From Apperception. An Essay on the Transcendental Deduction*. Revised Edition. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

Schulking, Dennis (2018b), ‘Zelfbewustzijn, idealisme en objectiviteit—over *Kant’s Radical Subjectivism*’. In: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 80 no. 2, 313–22.

Schulking, Dennis (2021), *Apperception and Self-Consciousness in Kant and German Idealism*. London: Bloomsbury.

⁶ Of course, I can form a notion of the necessary characteristics of a thing in itself and make a synthetic a priori judgement about it—e.g. that a thing in itself cannot be spatiotemporal. Such a judgement, however, does not relate to an actual particular object, that is, the *x* of an empirical intuition that underlies the subject-concept of a synthetic a posteriori judgement. It does not yield knowledge in the sense of the claims made in the Deduction. Further, such a judgement would still be bound by the constraints of transcendental apperception, under which an object in general can be thought, and so does not reach things in themselves as such (but just explains the concept of them). See Schulking (2017), ch. 9.

⁷ This paper is based on an earlier version published in Dutch as Schulking (2018b).