Dennis Schulting, Warwick

HEGEL ON KANT’S »SYNTHEtic A PRIORI« IN »GLAUBEN UND WISSEN«

I.

In this paper, I examine one aspect of Hegel’s appropriation of Kant’s thought, which I shall argue provides the clue to Hegel’s recast of the notion of synthetic a priori. It is my general claim that what facilitates Hegel’s unusual rendering of original synthetic unity is an unusually strong reading of a differentiation Kant stipulates between the analytic and synthetic unities of apperception.

Hegel writes in Glauben und Wissen: »The whole transcendental deduction […] cannot be understood without distinguishing what Kant calls the faculty of the original synthetic unity of apperception from the Ego which does the representing and is subject – the Ego, which, as Kant says, merely accompanies all representations«.¹

From the immediately following passage it appears that the accompanying Ego or »I« is equated with empirical consciousness.² The »faculty of the original synthetic unity« is not this »I« itself but exhibits a more fundamental level of self-consciousness or identity, a »true »I««, as Hegel writes.³ This higher self-consciousness Hegel calls »absolute identity«,⁴ in contrast to the mere »relative identity«,⁵ which is conferred upon the discrete manifold by the mere reflective Ego.⁶

II.

I would like to zero in on this distinction put forward by Hegel, a distinction between, on the one hand, the merely relative identity of a formal subject and a contentual empirical manifold and, on the other, an original synthetic unity in which both are presumably »immersed«.⁷ Hegel relates this issue directly to the position of the constituents of discursive judgment – subject and predicate – vis-à-vis this so-called absolute identity, or, pure self-consciousness. Discursive judgment has, in a sense, a secondary status with respect to it. »The absolute original identity of self-consciousness,« Hegel says, »out of itself posits judgment absolutely and a priori«.⁸ Even so, Hegel also seems to be arguing that judgment itself contains the pointer towards absolute identity.

I attempt to demonstrate, from a distinctly Kantian perspective, that the way in which Hegel draws on the differentiation between the original synthetic unity and the formal »I« is not germane to the purport of Kant’s reasoning in the Deduction. However, I leave aside the question how Hegel’s appropriations can be valued more positively in the context of the development of his own thought.

Hegel, I believe, misconstrues Kant’s argument towards the functional unity that obtains between the transcendental subject, which is the logical »I«, the completely empty »vehicles« of all »I«-indexed representations, and the transcendental object, the correlate of the synthetically unified manifold of representations. True, he captures the gist of Kant’s core argument (at B137) that whatever counts as an object corresponds to whatever is unified in one intuition in an act of synthesis. But Hegel’s modification of Kant’s auxiliary thesis that – as Kant writes at B133/34 – »the analytic unity of apperception is only possible under the presupposition of some synthetic one« does not stand up to scrutiny. I shall address this crucial point shortly.

Nevertheless, in conformity with the guiding-thread of the Deduction, which stipulates that »the same function that gives unity to the different representations in a judgment also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representations in an intuition«,⁹ Hegel appears to have understood the basic thrust of Kant’s strategy to locate the unified conceptual grasp of the external world in an identity that is a »Mittelbegriff«, as Hegel calls it himself,¹⁰ which is not intercalated between an absolute subsistent subject and an absolute subsistent object but first constitutes subject and object as distinguishable elements.¹¹ In this light must be understood Hegel’s ill-reputed characterization of a synthetic a priori judgment, the grammatical subject of
which is an expression of the intuited particular »in the form of being« and the predicate the universal »in the form of thought« respectively, which necessarily cohere so as to constitute the a priori concept of an object.¹³

Hegel seems to be saying, hinting at Kant’s reference to the copula in judgment as indicative of an objectively valid and hence synthetic a priori connection among one’s representations,¹⁴ that what binds concept and intuition together in their predicative relation — in which, to be sure, the syntactical difference of the constituent subject and predicate prevails — is indeed the original synthetic unity, which underlies the predication as ground. »Original« means that cause which cannot be regarded as an effect of an even deeper cause, i.e., an unconditioned ground. Elsewhere, Hegel identifies this ground as Being itself.¹⁵ I come back to this shortly.

III.

Hegel accurately interprets the original synthetic unity as pure self-consciousness and as transcendental ground of any possible objective cognition. To a certain extent, Hegel is right to call this a priori identity the original ground of judgment, given that the structure of judgment accords with possible experience. He also conforms to the Kantian strain of thought in emphasizing that Being cannot be appealed to extra-conceptually. It must be able to be shown as the ground of judgment by means of an analysis of judgment itself. This should occur by means of syllogistic inference, as Hegel suggests.¹⁶ I cannot now go into the details of this, but it is interesting to note that in the Jena Logic Draft, written shortly after Glauben und Wissen, Hegel sheds more light on his conception of the reflexive structure of the genesis of discursive judgment.¹⁷ Suffice it to say that the fact that this inferential knowledge is linked to a non-discursive intellectual intuition should not mislead one to believe that Hegel is uncritically clinging to a Romanticist »Gefühl fürs Absolute« that transcends the grasp of thought altogether. I submit that Hegel has recourse to the cumbersome notion of intellectual intuition in order to single out the special character of the kind of thought that goes beyond a mere formal analysis of the relata of judgment. He does not mean to say that knowledge of the Absolute would be non-conceptual and immediate. It is rather that, in discursive judgment, the copula is performe not cognized with regard to its own ground, of which Hegel thinks it is a deficient modus.¹⁸ The notion of intellectual intuition, I believe, should be taken as a conceptual expedient to rectify this apparent gap in discursive logic.

Notwithstanding Hegel’s insight into the requirement of conceptual mediation of any knowledge of an object, his identification of this original identity of judgment with Being itself departs significantly from Kant’s view. It is my claim that Hegel is able to recast Kant’s argument in terms of an ontology of predication only by dint of the aforementioned distinction between the reflective cogito, which is a merely formal identity, and the identity which is immersed in the manifold and is one with it;¹⁹ this latter type of identity is what Hegel thinks Kant refers to as figurative synthesis or productive imagination and is appropriately identified by Hegel as the »genuine speculative Idea«, the »true I«.²⁰ Hegel is most interested in this notion of productive imagination, for it might appear to permit of a conception of object-cognition for which the a priori is no longer sundered from the a posteriori.²¹

However, it is quite doubtful whether the distinction Hegel insists upon, a distinction between an abstract formal »I« and the »true I«, is at all warranted by Kant’s text. This distinction will be instrumental in an evaluation of the pertinence of Hegel’s interpretation of the original synthetic unity as absolute identity or Being, which he claims is immanent to Kant’s own reasoning.

IV.

Let us now consider this distinction in more detail. If I am right in my belief that it does not pertain to Kant, then Hegel’s extrapolation of absolute identity from the argument regarding the synthetic a priori would eo ipso be invalidated. To marshal the case against Hegel’s speculative claim I note three points in particular: (A) Hegel’s far too psychological interpretation of the formal »I«, which he falsely regards as coextensive with the emergence of empirical consciousness itself;²² (B) an overdetermination of the formal differenti-
ation of analytic unity of consciousness and synthetic unity of apperception and (C) Hegel’s crucial failure to heed the distinction between de re and de dicto necessity. This last point is borne out by a questionable aspiration to blur the boundary line between a priori and a posteriori as well as to collapse the distinction between possibility and actuality.23

A. On the face of it, Hegel conflates the reflective I (which accompanies all my representations) with empirical consciousness tout court or the psychological subject.24 This may seem odd, for Hegel also claims that the reflective I is merely formal and abstract. He describes the unity of this I as non-original,25 in contrast to the true a priori unity, which is the productive imagination, which contrast presumably reflects the distinction between analytic unity of consciousness and synthetic unity of apperception. Apparently, analytic unity of consciousness is effectively to be regarded as mere subjective empirical consciousness.26

Hegel does not seem to understand that the analytic unity of consciousness designates the necessary complement that guarantees conceptual unity to an intuitive compound; it signals the identity structure of the transcendental ground of a formal intuition (as numerically identical object). I come back to this below. This has nothing at all to do with a supposedly merely subjective or psychological act of a human mind that confers coherence on a world falling to pieces.27

Kant’s argument regarding pure apperception is not informed by a restriction to what the human mind is capable of cognizing. That is first argued by Kant in the so-called second step of the Deduction. The argument for intellectual synthesis, which lays down the constraints of thinking an object as object, obtains in all cases where thought is not a form of immediate apprehension but is dependent on external input for its content. Therefore, the discursive formal principle of analytic apperception is not intrinsically characterized by the specific nature of human consciousness, nor is analytic unity of consciousness coextensive with empirical consciousness.

B. Analytic unity of consciousness is not de re distinct from the synthetic unity of apperception. Both derive from the same functional act of understanding in judgment. This we can infer from Kant’s statement that the same function that gives unity to various representations in a judgment, also gives unity to the mere synthesis of various representations in one intuition, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of the understanding.28

The higher unity, of which Kant speaks near the end of section 15 of the Deduction, unifies the synthesis of the manifold in intuition and is shown to be the I think, the unity of consciousness that is the ground of synthetic unity. However, analytic unity of consciousness, being this higher unity, is contingent on synthetic contemplative unity nonetheless. Alternatively put, analytic form and synthetic a priori content, pure intuition, are mutually implicated. Kant says at A108: «For this unity of consciousness would be impossible if in the cognition of the manifold the mind could not become conscious of the identity of the function by means of which this manifold is synthetically combined into one cognition. Thus the original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself is at the same time zugleich a consciousness of an equally necessary unity of synthesis of all appearances in accordance with concepts.» Hence, the unity of the I think, or the transcendental unity of self-consciousness,29 is adverbial to a performed synthesis into the manifold of representations given in an intuition.

Crucially, the higher unity, the identity of the function of synthesis, is not – as Hegel would have it – the productive imagination as such, the synthetic a priori principle at work in extension itself.30 Rather, it is the logical capacity of conceptual discursive unification, which serves to warrant the combination of the formal intuition as objectively valid. This original capacity is expressed in terms of a propositional I think, which is co-referential with all other I think propositions. Such co-referentiality is tantamount to a functional identity of as well as among all I-indexed representational compounds. That is why Kant writes at B132: «I call it [sie, i.e., the representation I think] pure apperception [...] or also the original apperception, because it is that self-consciousness, which, in that [inden] it produces the representation I think, which must be able to accompany all others and is in all consciousness one and the same, cannot be accompanied by any further one.»31 It is this self-same consciousness that underwrites the possibility of synthetic combination and is thus coextensive with an original synthetic unity of co-refering representations. Transcendental self-consciousness is effectively nothing other than the operational production of the unitary representation I think, which grounds synthetic unity among an intuited manifold of representations in an empirical judgment.
Thus, given the identity of transcendental or pure self-consciousness and the \( \mathfrak{I} \) think-, Hegel's insistence on distinguishing between the original synthetic unity as the pure \( \mathfrak{I} \) and the mere reflective \( \mathfrak{I} \) think, as presumably having a secondary status, is entirely unfounded. By opposing two \( \mathfrak{I} \) s, Hegel manages to shift the merely functional notion of identity within the sphere of discursive judgment to a more substantial notion of identity, which putatively transcends discursive activity altogether and institutes a quasi-intuitive mode of cognition that embraces not merely possible experience but reality in itself. As such, the presumed distinction sanctions Hegel's ontological interpretation of the foundation of judgment.

I want briefly to return to the issue of productive imagination or figurative synthesis. The distinction between the figurative synthesis in intuition and intellectual synthesis on the conceptual level is a functional distinction in order to account for the impossibility of determining the lowest concept (i.e., the conceptus singularis seu individualis) by logical analysis alone.

One should be careful (and I believe Hegel is not, for he claims that the original identity is also the principle of sensibility as such\(^{22}\)) not to think that the distinction figurative–intellectual synthesis can be mapped one-to-one onto sensibility and understanding respectively. The relation between sensibility and understanding is asymmetrical. It is the understanding alone that is credited with the capacity of synthesis. Moreover, the synthetic relation is between intellectual discussion and formal intuition, not between the understanding and sensibility tout court; (ii) to bear in mind that figurative synthesis is not de re distinguishable from intellectual synthesis as if it concerned a separate instance of reason, the putative intuitive intellect, in contrast to the allegedly deflationary reflective act of the understanding. Figurative synthesis is, in conformity with the two-fold framework of the analytic proof of a priori object-cognition, the act of synthesis as it is carried out by the understanding on a given sensible manifold.

This is not to deny that in some respect figurative synthesis is different from intellectual synthesis, which latter is in principle not dependent on human sensible input and merely designates the functionality of judging;\(^{23}\) to the extent, then, that figurative synthesis is constitutive of a priori cognition of a really given object it is to be differentiated from mere intellectual synthesis. This differentiation reflects the proof-structure of the Deduction. In section 22 of the Deduction (B146), which I believe signals the starting-point of the next stage of the deductive argument, Kant observes that to think an object, the constraints of which he has elucidated in the preceding paragraphs, is not yet to cognize an object, the requirements of which he subsequently sets about explaining in the remaining sections. For cognition of an object to be possible, it must first be constructed in intuition (hence figurative synthesis).

Despite figurative synthesis and intellectual synthesis being interdependent in the specific case of human cognition, they do not conflate in all cases of discursive thought. It is altogether misleading, then, to hypothesize the productive imagination as the potency of Reason itself, as Hegel appears to do,\(^{24}\) as if any kind of intellectual synthesis is susceptible to it. Productive imagination, however much a priori, is clearly linked to the peculiar psychological make-up of human sensibility. In addition, it seems that Hegel is negligent of the fact that the principles of synthetic apprehension only apply for discursive modes of thought. Consequently, his straightforward identification of the synthetic unity of productive imagination with Reason itself\(^{25}\) is, from a Kantian point of view, illicit. This, by implication, undermines Hegel's claim that discursive judgment itself points to absolute identity.

C. The third reason I note concerns a conflation on Hegel's part of absolute and hypothetical necessity. Hegel challenges the view, espoused by Kant, that there must be something external to thought, which is believed to be independent from it and exists for itself,\(^{26}\) and which supervenues (hingewirkt) in a formal way to the empty formal identity.\(^{37}\) This something \( \text{\textit{alien}} \) (Fremdes), \( \text{\textit{the plus}} \) of sensation, remains absolutely opposed to the \( \text{\textit{binding activity}} \) (jenes Verbindenden)\(^{38}\) of the unity of self-consciousness, which, incidentally, Hegel here identifies with formal identity. Thus, Hegel says, a priori form and a posteriori content remain forever sundered.

Earlier, Hegel alluded to Kant's discussion of an intuitive intellect in the Critique of Judgment, for which possibility and actuality would be one, as a possible remedy against his formalism.\(^{39}\) Kant's unwillingness to explore the potential of this intuitive intellect goes to prove why ultimately he must be considered uncritical, or so Hegel maintains. In this way, Hegel misreads the intent of Kant's a priori or pure investigation into the possibility of object experience. What I believe is most damaging to Hegel's critique of Kant's formalism is his failure to heed the distinction Kant stipulates between a transcendental inquiry into the con-
straints of possible experience and a posteriori empirical experience, the latter being something with which a critique of pure Reason is not in the least concerned. Only the necessary conditions of truth can be determined, not the sufficient conditions.50

Critically, Hegel appears to ignore the distinction between the conditional necessity that governs successive syntheses within the realm of appearances and absolute necessity, which would coincide with a completed synthesis of the whole of reality. Such a synthesis of the whole, however, cannot be grasped at a stroke and therefore remains unknowable for non-intuitive minds. Alternatively put, discursive judgment and non-discursive knowledge of absolute identity are mutually exclusive ways of conceiving that cannot be bridged, as Hegel claims it can.

As we have seen above, on Kant’s view the synthetic unity of apprehension is nothing but a formal unity of mind, a functional principle that serves to warrant cognition of external objects as well as knowledge of ourselves as phenomenal embodied persons. Although Kant maintains that any objective connection of representations requires a transcendental ground as is the principle of self-consciousness, this ground is only unconditioned to the extent that it grounds the phenomenal world rather than absolutely.41 The proof-structure of the argument towards the constraints of a priori object-cognition is analytic, implying that determinate objectivity, governed by the identical analytic unity of thought, is strictly isomorphic to the performed synthesis in a given manifold of representations. This means that the identity at issue only obtains for a given compound of synthesized representations in a given case, and not for the whole of one’s mental experience. Kant writes: »Thus all manifold of intuition has a necessary relation to the I think in the same subject in which this manifold is to be encountered«.52 The identity of the self concerns »this manifold«, which is to be found in the correlate subject. It is not a claim about a necessary relation to the cogito with regard to any manifold nor does it concern a claim merely about a subject’s capacity for self-ascribing all of his representations. Karl Ameriks has made clear that the requirement of the »I think« is specifically not the requirement for one particular subject to have all perceptions.43 The underlying inference is: »If I am conscious of x, y, z, then there is one consciousness of x, y, z«, which is valid if and only if x, y, z are my perceptions, that is, accompanied by an »I think«, which clearly exhibits the tautological nature of Kant’s synthesis argument.

Whether the originality of synthetic unity is absolutely ungrounded can ex hypothesi not be determined. Substance in appearance is not the absolute subject but merely a »persisting image of sensibility«, as Kant says.45 Kant further explains why the transcendential »I« cannot be the absolute subject: »But though we may call this thinking self (the soul) substance, as being the ultimate subject of thinking which cannot be further represented as the predicate of another thing, it remains quite empty and inconsequential if permanence […] cannot be proved of it. But permanence can never be proved of the concept of a substance as a thing in itself, but only for the purposes of experiences.«46 In other words, even in beginning to try to determine the putative absolute subject, which amounts to a synthetic a priori claim, one would not be able to circumvent the very formal constraints (intellectual and figurative) that Kant has laid down precisely to explain the possibility of a priori synthetic experience of substantial objects.

V.

In conclusion, Hegel’s assumption that the ground of the formal constraints of possible experience must be determined as absolute identity – presumably since some form of pure self-consciousness must be taken to somehow precede discursive acts of judging – amounts to nothing less than a gross petitio principii. This assumption explains Hegel’s mistaken belief that a distinction between two »I«’s is requisite in order to grasp the nature of Kant’s Deduction argument.

Kant would not deny the formal apperceptive self an ontological substrate, in which possibility and actuality are presumably identical, but he would claim, with good reason, that such identity cannot be objectively determined within the constraints of possible experience.47 Such identity, to be more precise, simply could not be analytically proven in the fashion I have earlier indicated. For Hegel to claim that it can is to fundamentally beg Kant’s question with respect to the possibility of synthetic a priori cognition. Kant averts that absolute reality is a mere postulate of Reason, and a necessary one at that. Evidently, this metaphysical modesty flies in the face of Hegel’s speculative claim that the formal identity of the »I« and the a posteriori
content of experience must effectively be determined as the deficient modi of a more original identity or Self.98

Dr. Dennis Schulting
Flat 18 Elms Court,
24 Montague Road
London SW19 1SZ
United Kingdom
dennis_schulting@hotmail.com

ANMERKUNGEN
1 G.W.F. HEGEL, Gesammelte Werke, Hamburg, 1968 ff., vol. 4, 329; hereafter referred to as GW, followed by respective volume and page number(s). Translation used is from W. Cerf & H.S. Harris, Albany, 1977.
2 GW 4, 329.
3 Ibid., 328.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 327, 330.
6 Cf. ibid.
7 Ibid., 327, 329.
8 Ibid., 328.
10 CPR, A79=B104/105.
11 GW 4, 328.
12 Cf. ibid., 329, 331.
13 See ibid., 327.
14 CPR, B141/142.
16 GW 4, 328, 330.
17 See GW 7, 75 ff.
18 GW 4, 328/329. Cf. GW 7, 81.
19 GW 4, 327.
20 Ibid., 328.
21 Ibid., 335.
22 Cf. ibid., 329.
23 Ibid., 341.
24 Ibid., 329, 331.
25 Ibid., 330.
26 Hegel talks about »an experiencing subject« (ibid., 331).
27 Ibid., 330.
28 CPR, A79=B104/105, emphasis added.
30 Cf. GW 4, 329, 341.
31 Translation amended.
32 See GW 4, 327.
33 Cf. CPR, B153 and B428.
34 GW 4, 330, 341.
36 Cf. ibid., 328.
37 Ibid., 343, 344.
38 Ibid., 343.
39 Ibid., 341.
40 Cf. CPR, B79 ff.=A55 ff.
41 Cf. ibid., A401/402.
42 Ibid., B132.

Ibid.


*AA* IV, 334.


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