

KANT ON SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AS SELF-LIMITATION

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If we understood Kant's theoretical philosophy, we would understand how to think about the limits of intelligibility—the bounds of sense, in one interpretation of P.F. Strawson's intentionally ambiguous title. That would put us within reach of an insight only glimpsed, I think, by Kant himself: that those limits are not well conceived as a boundary, enclosing a territory by leaving other territory outside it. (McDowell, 2009:108)

Our reason is not like an indeterminably extended plane, the limits of which one can cognize only in general, but must rather be compared with a sphere, the radius of which can be found out from the curvature of an arc on its surface (from the nature of synthetic *a priori* propositions), from which its content and its boundary can also be ascertained with certainty. Outside this sphere (field of experience) nothing is an object for it; indeed even questions about such supposed objects concern only subjective principles of a thoroughgoing determination of the relations that can obtain among the concepts of understanding inside of this sphere. (A762/B790)

1. Introduction: Spontaneity and the Sensible Conditions of Thought

Kant's two-stem theory of cognition—according to which the faculties of understanding and sensibility are distinct, irreducible, but also inseparable sources of human cognition—provoked an entire philosophical tradition, from the post-Kantian German idealists through existential phenomenology, of attempting to make sense of the interaction between the two faculties in a way that also makes sense of the way or ways in which we are finite or limited as rational knowers. Soon after the appearance of the major publications of Kant's critical system came responses, both positive and negative. On the positive side, Fichte and the early Schelling sought to further Kant's philosophy by saying what they thought he was unable to say, while preserving the spirit of the critical philosophy (Fichte, 1994, and Schelling, 1980). For Fichte particularly, this involved deriving the fundamental results of the *Critique* from a first principle of self-consciousness, thus overcoming what appeared to be the brute contingency of the categories in Kant's explanation. On this view the first principle of self-consciousness, the "I", is intrinsically "self-positing", but only under the presupposition of and by positing the "Not-I". The "Not-I" is neither created by the "I" nor simply given as its limit. It is, rather, an internal presupposition of the "I" which acts as a limit, "check", or "summons" (*Anstoß*) only as it is self-consciously posited as such. Fichte sums this up by saying that the "I" is self-limiting (Fichte, 1991, I:305).

Hegel enthusiastically agreed with Kant that the unity of apperception (self-consciousness) was the source of the objectivity of knowledge, but vehemently disagreed with Kant that this self-consciousness, in requiring its content to be given from elsewhere, is the mere empty form of

thinking. In this way, Hegel also wanted to move beyond the idea that the “I” of self-consciousness is limited from the outside by something given. And, the attempt in his *Science of Logic* to make this move consisted of showing that the understanding and sensibility, and therefore concepts and intuitions, are not distinct, but self-consciously identical. Discursive human finitude in Kant, at least as Hegel sees it, is in some sense overcome by leaving nothing at all to presuppose as outside of the self-conscious “I”, including the *material* of thought itself. But the German tradition of grappling with these foundational Kantian notions continued past the German Idealists and into post-Husserlian phenomenology. Heidegger argued that the spirit of Kant in fact favored, and in some sense prefigured, Heidegger’s own existential-phenomenological view that the temporalizing activity of the pure imagination is the source of the pure categories of thought and the unity of apperception. Heidegger’s interpretation (and appropriation) of Kant emphasized the important *limiting role* of sensible intuition by suggesting that our sensible/imaginational activity is the root or anchor to which concepts and judgments are “in service” (Heidegger, 1962:28).

Later, after Strawson had grappled with Kant’s first *Critique* within the framework of 20th century analytic philosophy, John McDowell offered an insightful reading of the basic understanding-sensibility problem of Kant’s in *Mind and World* (1994). Here, McDowell’s basic insight is to see the problem anew. As he sees it, and to paraphrase, we must not think of the issue as one of trying to find space for spontaneity within the realm of nature, but as one of asking how nature might fit into the realm of spontaneity. Hence McDowell’s early “conceptualism”, according to which experience would be impossible if it were not already received as conceptually shaped. The view of the early McDowell can thus be summed up in his claim that the conceptual is “unbounded” (McDowell, 1994, Lecture II:24). The unboundedness of the conceptual is the analogue of Kant’s notion of the understanding’s spontaneity, whereby the understanding is self-determining—i.e., all of experience is an expression of understanding. The role of receptivity, then, is in some sense carved out of the sphere of spontaneous understanding. “Receptivity”, early McDowell says, “does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation” of the two capacities (McDowell, 1994:9). Receptivity figures in experience not as a separable moment, but as itself an expression of spontaneity. This way of putting it, however, does not yet tell us whether the view expresses an identity of spontaneity and receptivity (where spontaneity is always receptive in some way and vice versa) or whether receptivity is internal to spontaneity in a way such that spontaneity *outstrips* receptivity. The difference between these two positions, we will see, lies in the way in which they conceive of the relationship between self-consciousness and the limits of rational human cognition. If the spontaneity of the understanding is not to be conceived of as an element of what is naturally given, but rather givenness itself is internal to spontaneity, then we return to the post-Kantian question of how to understand the limits or finitude of human reason in a way that those limits are not mere external impositions. How could the limits associated with receptivity be somehow internal to the freedom of spontaneity?

So, very roughly, and again to bring into play a more contemporary distinction, the post-Kantian tradition spans a broadly “conceptualist” account wherein the sensible conditions of space and time are internal to conceptual activity, and a broadly “preconceptual” account wherein the pure synthesis of imagination is the common root of both conceptually-articulated activity and non-conceptual sensible activity. On the broadly conceptualist account, Kant’s notion of transcendental apperception determines the functions that space and time serve for human cognition; on the broadly preconceptual account, Kant’s transcendental apperception is “in the service” of and shaped by a “primordial” and pure form of sensible activity.

The arc of self-consciousness from Kant through McDowell, we see, runs from the idea of *absolute* self-limitation (where spontaneity determines even the bounds of receptivity) to the idea of rational self-limitation from within a spontaneous-receptive act (where spontaneity and receptivity are in some sense one). In this essay, I am primarily interested in the relationship between the notion of *self-consciousness* (specifically what Kant calls transcendental apperception) and *self-limitation* (our self-consciously determined rational finitude). Ultimately what I want to argue for is the claim that, for Kant, there is a point at which these two notions converge—where they are one and the same act. We see this by getting into view what the relationship is between a capacity's limits and its consciousness of those limits. If we consider the capacity of sensibility on its own, we see that the limits of that capacity and our knowledge of those limits are not identical. The limits of temporal consciousness are *known* only from outside those limits—i.e., in an act of the understanding. However, when we consider the capacity of understanding, we see that the limits of that capacity and our knowledge of those limits are identical. The limits of conceptual consciousness are *known* only in the conceptual act of drawing those limits. We will see that this lends a sense of completion to the spontaneity of transcendental apperception that is missing from non-conceptual forms of consciousness. Specifically, it tells us that Kant's project of *critique*, wherein the determine boundaries of knowledge are drawn, is only possible as we come to grips with the fact that the spontaneity of transcendental apperception possesses this completeness.

I proceed by spelling out a progression of forms of self-consciousness in Kant's philosophy. This is not a temporal or historical progression, but a logical one where at each stage we locate the limits of the capacity in question and ask what it takes to know those limits. After briefly sketching a notion of self-consciousness available even to the non-human animal, I look at whether there could be a notion of self-consciousness available to the capacity of human sensibility. At this stage I argue that Kant and Heidegger (or Heidegger's Kant) share a conception of what it is to be self-limiting through self-consciousness. I then critically examine this conception, and, specifically, the way in which it fails to account for the most essential form of self-limitation in Kant's Critical philosophy—namely, the form of self-limitation which *rejects* spatial and temporal articulation. The conclusion I reach is that Kant's theory of transcendental self-consciousness is a theory of the activity of thinking as determining itself (including its limits) non-spatially and non-temporally.

2. Kant and the Spontaneity of Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness is central to Kant's overall philosophical project, although its central role has been understood in very different ways by different readers. It is perhaps easiest for most contemporary philosophers to see how self-consciousness is central for Kant by looking at his practical philosophy. Anyone who teaches Kant's practical philosophy knows that a moral action is one that is performed from a consciousness of its legislation by the moral law: "*duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law*" (GMS, 4:400). Action *from a respect for law* is, in turn, to be distinguished from action that merely *conforms with* the law. While discussing the case of the man who is beneficent because his soul happens to be "sympathetically attuned", Kant says that "in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth [...]" (GMS, 4:398). I exercise duty, then, only when I act from an awareness of the goodness of my action. Or, in other words, I act well only when I am conscious that I am acting well—that is, only when I am self-conscious. The centrality of self-consciousness to Kant's practical philosophy can thus be expressed by saying that the whole

of human action, insofar as it aims at its own goodness, is nothing independently of the self-consciousness of action.

In the case of Kant's theoretical philosophy, the centrality of self-consciousness has not been understood so uncontroversially. Most would agree that theoretical reason's self-consciousness (in particular, the non-empirical self-consciousness of the understanding, or *transcendental apperception*) is, in some sense, the apex of theoretical reason. It is, after all, that which secures the very possibility of knowledge (B140). But some regard transcendental apperception as an apex *to be achieved*, while others regard it as *always already* achieved in any act of cognition (*Erkenntnis*). For example, while Patricia Kitcher regards transcendental apperception as a unity of consciousness to be achieved in a real process of "forging" bonds or relations across judgments, Stephen Engstrom regards this same unity of consciousness as a fundamental or generic form of self-consciousness underlying any act of cognition (Kitcher, 2011:137, and Engstrom, 2013:38). It would not be unusual to approach this sort of debate by first tackling a focused issue of Kant scholarship—for instance, the issue of whether to understand Kant as a conceptualist or a non-conceptualist,¹ the answer to which may lead us to a better grasp of the specific role of transcendental apperception. However, sometimes it is useful to step back from such focused debates and consider, more broadly, how a precise understanding of the nature of such a central concept might help us to shed light on other, more widely-encompassing, debates.² This is what I will attempt in this paper.

Specifically, I aim to show that reflection on the very concept of a self-conscious capacity reveals to us certain features of the more specific form of *transcendental* self-consciousness which figures so centrally in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In particular, this reflection reveals features that may help us to make significant progress in narrower debates among Kant scholars. I will begin by considering how a power of self-consciousness might initially develop in a merely sensible capacity—i.e., as a sensible power. We will see that this conception of self-consciousness runs up against limitations which, as we become conscious of them, reveal what the relation between our capacity of sensibility and our capacity of understanding must be like. The most important idea revealed in this investigation is that a capacity's consciousness of itself reveals both its limits and its cognition of those limits. In seeing what the limits of sensibility are, we also see what it means to cognize them as limits. In the case of sensibility, cognition of its limits requires a kind of awareness from outside of the capacity of sensibility itself. When we turn to the capacity of understanding, we derive a conception of the limits of both judgment and thinking in general, and again in a way that reveals what the nature of our knowledge of those limits consists in. In the case of the understanding, knowing our limits involves determining those limits *through* our knowledge of them—that is, it is a conception of *self*-limitation. This discussion ultimately reveals that the relation between sensibility and understanding is one in which the former must be seen as deficient or incomplete in the absence of the activity of the latter.

3. Sensory Self-Consciousness

Kant's transition from the Transcendental Aesthetic to the Transcendental Analytic is a change of focus from an analysis of our capacity to be given objects in intuition (i.e., sensibly) to an analysis

¹ See, e.g, (Hanna, 2015).

² I take Engstrom's approach to be a prime example of this method (2006, 2013).

of our capacity to think, and more specifically to *know*, those objects.³ It is in the latter analysis—that of the faculty of understanding—where Kant first brings our attention to the notion of self-consciousness (*apperception*). This may lead one to believe that self-consciousness is a feature only of thinking and not of sensible intuition. And, indeed, it is true that the primary usage of the term “self-consciousness” (and especially “apperception”) is reserved for Kant’s discussion of the nature of the act of judging. However, Kant does not thereby believe that self-consciousness is only a feature of the understanding. We can see why we can attribute this to Kant by looking at what he says about non-human animals:

[I]t is one thing to *differentiate* things from each other, and quite another thing to *recognize* the difference between them. The latter is only possible by means of judgments and cannot occur in the case of animals, who are not endowed with reason. The following division may be of great use. *Differentiating logically* means recognizing that a thing A is not B; it is always a negative judgment. *Physically differentiating* means being driven to different actions by different representations. The dog differentiates the roast from the loaf, and it does so because the way in which it is affected by the roast is different from the way in which it is affected by the loaf (for different things cause different sensations); and the sensations caused by the roast are a ground of desire in the dog which differs from the desire caused by the loaf, according to the natural connection which exists between its drives and its representations. (Spitzfindigkeit, 2:60)

According to Kant, even non-human animals have the capacity (“physically”, not “logically”) to *differentiate* and *categorize* objects in their environment. And this is surely a plausible thought. The dog distinguishes the roast from the loaf, because it has a desire to eat the roast. What is it to have such a desire? Kant’s own definition of desire is that it is the “faculty to be by means of its representations the cause of the reality of the objects of these representations” (KpV, 5:9n.). And, as Kant notes, feelings of pleasure or displeasure are “necessarily combined with the faculty of desire” (KU, 5:178). This is because the faculty of desire is essentially a faculty that seeks an agreement between itself and its object. When I desire coffee, my representation of coffee has the power to bring about the drinking of it, and the measure of success or failure lies in the resulting pleasure or displeasure. Accordingly, pleasure is defined as a

representation of the agreement of an object or of an action with the subjective conditions of life, i.e. with the faculty of the causality of a representation with respect to the reality of its object. (KpV, 5:9n.)

Pleasure promotes the activity of desire, and thereby sustains it, while displeasure would inhibit the faculty of desire. The dog, in desiring the roast, is pleased when the roast is attained and displeased when it is taken away. But we can now see that the dog’s desire to eat the roast, and thus its manner of sorting the roast from the loaf, is a consciousness of the agreeableness of the roast with its faculty of desire. This is certainly not what Kant, in the first *Critique*, calls apperception (either empirical or transcendental). However, it is clear from Kant’s account that the dog’s abilities require a consciousness of some principle internal to itself—e.g., a principle to acquire food of certain kinds. We may therefore attribute to the dog at least some rudimentary form of self-consciousness. We may say, for instance, that in the dog’s conscious activities, its pleasure and displeasure reflect its own capacity of desire. The dog at least *notices* its conscious

³ Kant is very clear in the introduction to the *Analytic* that he proposes to analyze our *faculty* of thinking, not the contents of concepts.

states in relation to an inner principle governing its movements, even if it does not perform these movements *from* a consciousness of its inner principle (i.e., in an act of recognition through concepts [A103]). This rudimentary form of self-consciousness we may call *sensory self-consciousness*—a consciousness, in the act of perceiving, of the way in which the perception is related to an inner governing principle (in this case, in terms of agreement or disagreement with respect to nourishment).

To know wherein lies the difference between sensory self-consciousness and a higher form of self-consciousness (viz., a concept-involving one) is to demarcate the *limits* of sensory self-consciousness. Now, recalling our central question: what are these limits and what is the nature of our knowledge of them? In the case of animal self-consciousness, the limits of sensory self-consciousness are the limits of self-consciousness *simpliciter*, not limits demarcating one form from another. This is to say that those limits are simply what provide the animal with whatever field of cognition it has. If we begin here, we will be able to ascertain the relation between the animal's cognitive limits and its consciousness of them.

It is immediately apparent that the extent of the field of cognition for the animal is what it is independently of what the animal cognizes. Why is this? It is because, for the animal, its act of cognition follows a rule or principle which is given to it. From this it follows that the particular kind of rule given to the animal is what determines the field of its cognition. Its cognition is *limited to* the given principle (for example, the agreeableness of the roast over the loaf). Now, we might wish to generalize this model of cognition and declare that even the human being's cognition is limited to a given principle of cognition. However, if we follow Kant, we see that even in sensory self-consciousness, which exhibits what he calls "receptivity", the human is not limited in precisely this way.

4. The Self-Giveness of Spatial and Temporal Cognition

Now that I have briefly sketched an account of animal self-consciousness, we can turn to the issue of how animal self-consciousness is, for Kant, exemplary of *receptive* or *non-spontaneous* cognition.

Animal self-consciousness is characterized by an agreement between what is taken in through the senses and a principle internal to the animal qua sensory being. This, we have also said, is a way of understanding how animal cognition might be characterized as a genuine form of activity—that is, animal cognition is self-maintaining in the sense of being brought about and sustained by the animal's own inner principles of perception, movement, etc. But despite this, Kant reserves the term "spontaneous" for rational cognition (exemplified by *knowledge*).⁴ This, I believe, is because Kant takes spontaneity to be, in the first place, a form of activity that is fully self-determining. Kant's initial characterization of spontaneity, in the introduction to the *Transcendental Logic* of the first *Critique*, is as an activity (a "bringing forth") opposed to receptivity (A51/B75). This suggests that the difference between human cognitive spontaneity and animal spontaneity is a difference in purity—i.e., in the extent to which the form of spontaneity is self-standing and not dependent upon something else, like a form of receptivity. The form of cognitive activity in the animal is, by contrast with the human, only spontaneous in a "relative" or diminished sense. We loan the notion of spontaneity to the animal, but only as it reflects the full and complete sense of spontaneity belonging to human cognition. The spontaneity characteristic

⁴ It is standard in contemporary Kant interpretation to refer to knowledge as a special case of cognition, and to translate Kant's term "*Erkenntnis*" as "cognition" in order to capture this. But, as Engstrom (2006) has pointed out, Kant uses "*Erkenntnis*" primarily to refer to knowledge.

of the animal is spontaneity conditioned by receptivity in a way that it is not for the human.⁵ I will now spell out two grades of this diminished form of spontaneity: one spelled out in terms of “givenness” and one in terms of “self-givenness”.⁶

The term “given” and its cognates gained popularity with the work of Wilfrid Sellars and his attack on “The Myth of the Given” (Sellars 1963). But, as Sellars acknowledges, this way of speaking has its historical roots in the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition. In the B Preface to the first *Critique*, Kant defines *theoretical* (as opposed to *practical*) knowledge as knowledge that determines an object which is “given from elsewhere” (Bx). Then, in the A Introduction, Kant introduces the “two stems” of cognition—sensibility and understanding—the former of which is our capacity to be given objects through the senses (A15/B29). Later, in the introduction to the *Transcendental Logic*, Kant specifies that the sensibility can also be called a capacity of *receptivity* as opposed to *spontaneity* (A51/B75). An object is *given* to the senses as the senses *receive* it. The senses must *be able to* receive objects, which is to say that our sensible capacity is a capacity for being open to affection.

Kant explains that our openness to being affected by objects is constituted by the forms of our sensibility, space and time:

[T]hat which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations I call the form of appearance. (A20/B34)

The forms of sensibility *allow* the manifold to be intuited as ordered. Time, Kant says, is the most fundamental form of sensibility—that which orders all of intuition (B182). In what sense is the form of time an “allowance” of affection? I believe, in accordance with Heidegger’s reading of Kant, that the answer may be found in the threefold synthesis of the A-Edition *Transcendental Deduction*. It is here where Kant describes synthesis as taking three forms: apprehension, reproduction, and recognition. One thing Heidegger approvingly emphasizes is the important connection between time and synthesis, especially in apprehension and reproduction.⁷ Time *is* fundamentally a synthesis by being a mode of self-affection. In particular, Heidegger says that this synthesizing self-affection is “the original tri-unitary formation of future, past, and present” (Heidegger, 1962:201). To understand this, we must understand both what self-affection is and what it means for self-affection to be a synthesis. Self-affection, broadly speaking, involves the subject’s determining-relation to its own inner state. For Kant this occurs in an act of the understanding on sensibility (B152-53).⁸

⁵ This is not to say that our spontaneity is not, in some sense, “conditioned” by our dependence on sensibility. However, our dependence on sensibility is *not* the dependence present in the animal.

⁶ I have addressed in more precise terms the difference between “relative” and “absolute” spontaneity elsewhere in (Ellis 2017).

⁷ The case of recognition is more controversial. Heidegger claims that Kant’s treatment of recognition reveals, through the self-affection involving time’s affect on concepts, that time and the “I” of transcendental apperception are one and the same (1962:198).

⁸ Note that Kant does not claim that an act of understanding on itself is to be understood as “self-affection”. Since he nevertheless describes the understanding as a capacity of “self-activity” (*Selbsttätigkeit*) or spontaneity, we must distinguish “self-determination” in general from “self-affection” specifically. See (Kraus, 2019:fn. 20), who claims that there are two forms of self-affection: empirical and pure.

The understanding's effect on inner sense, most notably, constitutes a temporal ordering through what Kant calls the figurative synthesis (B151). This act is an ordering of the manifold of intuition (synthesizing or combining, and thus an exercise of understanding on sensibility) as a successive sequence of representations. It appears that this successive ordering is more fundamental than spatial ordering at least in the sense that it applies not just to objects of specifically *inner* sense, but also the objects of outer sense. But even though time would appear to be the root form of intuition for Kant, there is another sense in which time and space are inherently linked. As he puts it in the discussion of self-affection and inner sense, we cannot even represent time to ourselves without the image of a line with which we may distinguish one moment from the next in succession (B154). As some have aptly pointed out, time and space are inextricably linked for Kant because the function of time *is* to combine what is given in outer sense (see, e.g., Longuenesse, 1998:228, and Valaris, 2008). This, as Valaris (2008) notes, stands in opposition to an alternative view (see, e.g., Allison, 2004) according to which inner sense presents us with an object different from what is given in outer sense. Valaris's view represents what has been called a "transparency" account of inner sense—that is, it says that inner awareness is always directed *outward*.⁹ This account, in turn, enables us to get into view a form of self-consciousness belonging to the empirical "I". According to the "transparency" account, the act of temporal ordering just is an act of awareness of outer objects *as belonging* to my cognition, i.e., as mine, since (1) the objects of inner sense are not further or higher-order objects and (2) temporal ordering of objects in relation to one another is impossible without that relation involving the conscious subject. (2) in particular is explored in detail by Kant in the discussion of the threefold synthesis of the A Deduction:

Now it is obvious that if I draw a line in thought, or think of the time from one noon to the next, or even want to represent a certain number to myself, I must necessarily first grasp one of these manifold representations after another in my thoughts. But if I were always to lose the preceding representations (the first parts of the line, the preceding parts of time, or the successively represented units) from my thoughts and not reproduce them when I proceed to the following ones, then no whole representation and none of the previously mentioned thoughts, not even the purest and most fundamental representations of space and time, could ever arise. (A102)

Here Kant links the first moment of synthesis ("the synthesis of apprehension") with the second moment ("the synthesis of reproduction"). Heidegger takes the unity of the three moments of synthesis to represent the threefold structure of time with respect to tense: present, past, future. Whether this is exactly Kant's view is not important here. What is important is that the form of time, temporality, is structured such as to involve a synthetic awareness of past, present, and future. This is to say that in any particular act of temporal ordering—say, in an awareness of being so far along in the process of baking—my awareness of being so far along is at the same time an awareness of the relation between this "now", earlier moments of the process, as well as an anticipation of where the process is going. This synthesis—the pure synthesis of the imagination—is thus essentially a self-relating act, as it relates my act now with my acts in the past and future. This synthesis of self-relating is spontaneous in the sense that it is a unity of moments only through my consciousness of those moments as belonging together as one. However, if we consider conscious temporality *simpliciter*, it is clear that there is an ineliminable element of receptivity. If Kant is right that time is nothing but a form of our intuition, then it is also right to say that

⁹ This view is heavily indebted to Sartre. See also (Newton, 2019) for a recent defense.

temporality as such is not fully spontaneous. The spontaneity is receptive and the receptivity spontaneous. Here is why.

Kant says that space and time themselves are not objects of the senses. This has been the cause of some controversy, since in a famous footnote in the B Deduction, Kant claims that space and time *can* be grasped as objects (B160-61n.). But this need not be cause for confusion. There are two important things to note about the claim that space and time themselves cannot be objects of the senses: (1) that they are not *given as objects* and (2) that they are not *objects of the senses*. (1) is trivially true because something can only be given as an object against the background of space and time as the pure forms of intuition. (2) is true because space and time are only objects as they are informed by an act of the understanding, which is to say that they are not objects *for themselves*: space and time are not objects the cognition of which is achieved by the forms of space and time themselves. Ultimately this means simply that space and time are not fully self-conscious forms of representation—that is, they do not (at least not fully) afford a grasp of themselves. This partially explains the manner in which space and time *are* given: they are given not as objects, but in the sense of being our forms of intuition that *are* those forms independently of being fully comprehended as such. And yet, despite their givenness, space and time are forms of sensible *activity*. Objects can be given to the senses (through affection) only as the forms of space and time are forms of our receiving them.

What I have described here might therefore be referred to as the *self-givenness* of time. This would be to conceive of time (temporality) as a kind of spontaneous-receptive hybrid, as the givenness of time is not (for lack of a better term) “brute” givenness.¹⁰ I have described animal self-consciousness as resting on a principle of agreement. Because the animal does not locate itself in time through a self-affection of understanding on sensibility (if for no other reason than that animals lack conceptual awareness), it does not have time consciousness at all in the way that rational beings do. That is, animals lack a *conception* of time, and lacking such a conception they are merely subject *to* time. Thus, a rational time consciousness rests on a further principle of awareness, which we can call *the principle of self-givenness*.

And now we can also see that the principle of self-givenness is to be contrasted with the givenness of the animal’s principle of life. For the latter principle is given, *not* through an awareness of its activity, but “brutely”. The animal, inasmuch as it follows the principle of agreement, does not do so *from an awareness* of that principle as such.

Heidegger goes so far as to praise Kant for laying the groundwork for us to see that time and synthesis are one. If this is true, then Kant should have accepted that the purest form of synthetic activity—the synthetic unity of apperception—is nothing but temporality itself. But Heidegger acknowledges that Kant rejects this (Heidegger, 1962:204). Why does Kant reject it? I now turn to that question.

5. The Critique of Spontaneous-Receptivity

If, like Heidegger, we identify the “I” with temporality as such, then the limits of self-consciousness are the limits of time as a form of sensibility. We have already broached the topic of how the forms of sensibility are themselves exemplary of a diminished form of self-consciousness. If this is true, then we will be able to see the limits of temporal self-consciousness clearly in relation to pure apperception as a higher form of self-consciousness. Specifically, we will see that the limits of sensory consciousness are given in a way that the limits of *thinking* are

¹⁰ Cf. McDowell’s characterization of Kant’s forms of sensibility as “brutely” given (2009, p. 76).

not. This difference will then be taken up in order to illustrate the way in which, at the level of the understanding, self-consciousness and self-limitation become one and the same topic.

So, now we must distinguish the spontaneity of *self-givenness* from the spontaneity in which there apparently is no givenness (what Kant himself simply calls “spontaneity” as opposed to receptivity). We can draw this distinction by attending to the difference between the form of temporal (and spatial) activity and the form of judgment. And the way in which we can attend to this difference is by asking whether we understand the spontaneity of understanding (pure spontaneity) by thinking judgment as having a spatial or temporal form. Initially it may seem quite implausible that anyone could interpret Kant as claiming judgment to have a spatial form. For what could this even mean? A synthesis of concepts is no spatial magnitude. While we will address a way in which contemporary philosophers make use of a spatial metaphor for thinking of judgment, we will temporarily set this aside and begin with the somewhat more plausible-sounding view that judgment has a temporal form.

The nature and possibility of synthetic judgment—and especially of synthetic a priori judgment—is the central topic of the first *Critique*. Kant concerns himself, that is, with knowledge involving the synthesis of a subject concept with a predicate concept. When we have such knowledge, we have it under temporal conditions. This becomes most fully apparent in the discussion of the Analogies of Experience, where Kant argues that the conscious unity of a synthetic judgment—that unity of consciousness through which we synthesize subject and predicate concepts—is a consciousness involving a “time-determination”. Kant’s rather straightforward way of putting this is to say that time is “the pure image ... for all objects of the senses in general” (B182). That is, all objects are determined temporally. And, since all synthetic judgment is the determination of an object, all synthetic judgments are temporal determinations. More specifically, synthetic judgment is always a determination of “the time-series, the content of time, the order of time, and finally the sum total of time in regard to all possible objects” (B184-185). The very act of joining subject and predicate is an act of temporal determination in one of the above ways.

So, Kant holds that synthetic judgment is essentially a relation of thought to temporality. If Heidegger’s analysis is correct, this relation of thought to temporality is a relation of identity. But now we will question this. If we are right, then we will be able to see that the unity of time (and space) need not make room for thought, but rather that thought must be able to provide for the possibility of temporal (and spatial) unity. This, in turn, will shed light on the manner in which the self-consciousness of sensibility (through the principle of *self-givenness*) is incomplete.

4.1 Spontaneous-Receptivity

I have explicated a notion of self-limitation in terms of the limits of sensibility (specifically, temporality), and we can see that this self-limitation is an act of spontaneity which is at the same time receptive. This is what I call “spontaneous-receptivity”, or SR. SR is now subject to a critique as we see what it means to know the forms of sensibility, both spatial and temporal.

As we have seen, Kant argues that the determination of inner sense by the understanding is an act of self-affection. The understanding, that is, affects inner sense to produce a combination of the manifold already lying within it. If so, then all objectively valid judgment involves, in addition to the act of judgment itself—which is no act of inner sense, and no experience at all (see, e.g., Refl, 5661)—the experience of being affected in inner sense. And this experience of affection is an experience of *self*-affection: the “I” of transcendental apperception affects the “I” of empirical apperception.

Now I want to argue that according to SR the realm of spontaneity is self-limiting in a way that mirrors Kant's explanation of self-affection. If this is right, however, then it mischaracterizes the formal differences between understanding ("conceptuality") and sensibility ("intuitionality"); it *sensibilizes* the understanding. To see this, we will examine the nature of spatial and temporal unity, which in turn will shed light on the distinction between the understanding's form of limitation and sensory limitation. In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant argues that space is a form of intuition because it is an immediate singular a priori representation. One upshot of this is that the pure intuition of space is a representation the whole of which precedes its parts:

[F]irst, one can only represent a single space, and if one speaks of many spaces, one understands by that only parts of one and the same unique space. And these parts cannot as it were precede the single all-encompassing space as its components (from which its composition would be possible), but rather are only thought in it. It is essentially single; the manifold in it, thus also the general concept of spaces in general, rests merely on limitations. From this it follows that in respect to it an *a priori* intuition (which is not empirical) grounds all concepts of it. (A25/B39)

Particular spaces are *parts of* one representation of (infinite) space. But those parts could not be merely cobbled together into the representation of this singular whole. The mere aggregate of a number of particular spaces would be, Kant says, a *creature of our imagination* (A40/B57). The existence of particular parts of space—the spatial manifold—is the result of limitations on the whole of space. The unity of the pure intuition of space, then, is a unity preceding its parts. As Kant says, the unity of pure intuition is one that contains its manifold.

The unity of space as a whole is what Kant refers to as the *formal intuition* of space.¹¹ Kant says of the formal intuition:

In the *Aesthetic* I ascribed this unity merely to sensibility, only in order to note that it precedes all concepts, though to be sure it presupposes a synthesis, which does not belong to the senses but through which all concepts of space and time first become possible. For since through it (as the understanding determines the sensibility) space or time are first given as intuitions, the unity of this *a priori* intuition belongs to space and time, and not to the concept of the understanding. (A25/B39)

The unities of space and time as wholes precede all concepts, but *presuppose a synthesis* which does not belong to the senses. As he goes on to clarify, this presupposed synthesis is that between the understanding and the sensibility, *through which* space and time are first given as intuitions. Nevertheless, this unity belongs to space and time, not to the understanding. This is an incredibly difficult passage. Still, we can glean from it that, according to Kant, space and time could not be *given* as formal intuitions independently of an original synthesis of understanding and sensibility. We could have no formal intuition of space (and time) through the sensibility alone. Why does Kant think this?

Kant thinks the formal intuition cannot be given through sensibility alone because to grasp space *as a whole* is to already be, in some sense, beyond space. Before getting into the complex details of Kant's view, we can make sense of this idea rather commonsensically. As Heidegger puts it in *The Origin of the Work of Art*:

¹¹ As opposed to the *form of* intuition, which is the manner in which I am given a manifold (B160-161n)

A stone is worldless. Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked. The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings. (1993:170)

The distinction between merely belonging to a world and having a world is marked off by the fact that having a world requires a consciousness of one's place in it. Rational beings, Kant likewise thinks, do not merely belong to a nexus of spatial relations; rather, they place themselves in that nexus through a consciousness of their so belonging to it.

Consider the faculty of the imagination as it would operate independently of the understanding. As a faculty belonging to sensibility, the imagination would find itself limited spatially and temporally. It would be trapped, so to speak, within the expanses of space and time. As such, the imagination would not be able to find its way to getting a glimpse of the whole of space or time. We do have a grasp of what space and time are as wholes, since we place ourselves *in* space and time, as opposed to merely occupying them. This consciousness of the empirical self as in space and time is thus a consciousness that is not limited spatially.

How is it that we grasp space and time as wholes? It is only possible, Kant thinks, through the unity of apperception. In a famous footnote to B136 Kant argues that because we can represent intuitions *as* singular, they must already contain within them the higher unity of apperception:

Space and time and all their parts are intuitions, thus individual representations along with the manifold that they contain in themselves (see the Transcendental Aesthetic), thus they are not mere concepts by means of which the same consciousness is contained in many representations, but rather are many representations that are contained in one and in the consciousness of it; they are thus found to be composite, and consequently the unity of consciousness, as synthetic and yet as original, is to be found in them. This singularity of theirs is important in its application (see §25). (B136n.)

As we have seen, the wholes of space and time contain their manifolds. As such, their parts are many representations contained in one (self-conscious) representation. All singular representations, whether they be parts of space or the pure intuition of space itself, are thus determined according to the unity of self-consciousness. Or, in other words, every consciousness of intuition as something singular is a consciousness of that singular representation's belonging to the whole of space or time. If Kant is correct, then as beings who judge only under sensible conditions, we grasp the formal unity of the wholes of space and time. This implies that the limitation of our cognition to sensible conditions is not a limitation of being stuck inside those sensible conditions.

SR, as we have seen, conceives of the self-limitation of the understanding in a way that mirrors Kant's notion of self-affection. The notion that in judging I am passive to constraints internal to my capacity to judge is remarkably similar to the form of limitation internal to space.¹² So, let us take a closer look at this similarity and its consequences for SR as a conception of the spontaneity of the understanding.

¹² Kant is explicit in the Transcendental Deduction that he thinks of time in terms of self-affection, but he does not explicitly refer to space in the same section (B153-155). However, the limits internal to spatial representation are drawn through the self-affection of time [as in drawing a line and cutting it into segments]. Moreover, what is important for me here is not that we identify SR's conception of self-limitation with that of the pure intuition of space, but that we see how there is an *analogue* between SR's conception of self-limitation and the passive self-limitation belonging to sensibility generally.

It is important for Kant that space and time themselves cannot be perceived. He says in the *Anticipations of Perception*:

Perception is empirical consciousness, i.e., one in which there is at the same time sensation. Appearances, as objects of perception, are not pure (merely formal) intuitions, like space and time (for these cannot be perceived in themselves). (A166/B207)

Perception is always consciousness involving sensation, which in turn corresponds to the effect that some object has on our sensible capacity. Thus, there is no perception except of what affects us. As a result, space and time themselves are not perceived, as they are not themselves alterations of our sensible capacity, but its very form. Kant goes on to say:

Space and time are *quanta continua*, because no part of them can be given except as enclosed between boundaries (points and instants), thus only in such a way that this part is again a space or a time. Space therefore consists only of spaces, time of times. Points and instances are only boundaries, i.e., mere places of their limitation; but places always presuppose those intuitions that limit or determine them, and from mere places, as components that could be given prior to space or time, neither space nor time can be composed. Magnitudes of this sort can also be called flowing, since the synthesis (of the productive imagination) in their generation is a progress in time, the continuity of which is customarily designated by the expression “flowing” (“elapsing”). (A169-170/B211-212)

In addition to the thought that space and time are not themselves perceived, Kant is here arguing that the parts of space and time are only ever given *as enclosed* in boundaries. Moreover, “places” always presuppose intuitions that limit or determine them. Kant seems to be arguing that we are only ever aware of spaces and times through their being marked off by boundaries of one space and one time, which are not themselves given in perception. And the boundaries of space and time are marked off through the perception of something which affects us. For instance, the place of the room in which I now sit is intelligible to me only as it is marked off by its walls. In this example, all that is given in sensation are the walls marking off the place. The space itself is intelligible only as it is bounded by something which affects me in sensation.

As such, *absences* are not themselves directly perceived. I notice an absence of space, for instance, only as I am affected by something else with a positive magnitude. Thus, I notice absence only through perceiving my encountering something that is not an absence. The existence of an absence is determined through a kind of encounter, and thus passively. Though, to be sure, this passivity is not *mere* passivity. It is a passivity, in some sense, *to* my own sensible capacity. For, as we have seen, space and time are limited from within. I necessarily represent my encounter of the wall marking off the edge of a space by its contrast with the broader emptiness of space. And the broader emptiness of space, in turn, is nothing but a representation. If my thought were *inside* the limits of space and time, then it would be subject to the same kinds of limitation as space and time. In this case, as we see, thought would be subject to a kind of passivity; not a pure passivity, but one that has the character of self-affection—that is, of being constrained from within one’s own capacity.

4.2 An Apparent Difficulty

According to SR, the transcendental “I” is pure imagination. And above we suggested that conceiving of the “I” in this way is inapt to the extent that it makes the judging “I” passive to its

limits. But, perhaps such a view will not be seen as problematic. Perhaps one reason for this is that SR preserves the notion of an external constraint on judging, a natural way of securing the thought that our reason is finite. Surely, the reasoning may go, what it means for the human intellect to be finite is precisely that it has limits that are not determined in its own acts of thinking. SR provides an account according to which the limits of the I are not *brutely* given in the sense that they are just there independently of our conceptual activity, but are also limits that are not determined through our thought of them. This may seem to strike a nice balance. If we are inclined to accept such a picture, then we are accepting a picture according to which the I does not know its *determinate boundaries*, for knowing a determinate boundary involves the thought of something beyond that boundary. For SR, though, this might seem unnecessary and even unintelligible.

As an example, according to McDowell it is problematic for Kant to hold that we can think *beyond* the sensible to the supersensible:

Now there are familiar features of Kant's thinking that can help explain why he is attracted by the idea of an unknowable supersensible reality, *apparently in violation of his own standards for what makes sense*. The transcendental framework gives the appearance of explaining how there can be knowledge of necessary features of experience. And Kant thinks acknowledging the supersensible is a way to protect the interests of religion and morality. (McDowell, 1994:96)

This brief statement points to a (Strawsonian) concern about noumena—namely, that an appeal to noumena would be nonsensical. Traditionally, the reason for this view is that any appeal to noumena would necessarily involve applying the categories, which can only be applied to phenomena. Thus, on this view, appeals to noumena are contradictory and useless (Strawson, 1966:264-65). So long as McDowell accepts some version of this thought, it would appear that he does hold that an attempt to know the limits of space and time threatens nonsense. For, to know the limits of space and time would require knowing *beyond* space and time, beyond the life activity of the one who judges. This can be compared with Wittgenstein's claim in the *Tractatus*:

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense. (Wittgenstein, 1999:27)

According to Wittgenstein, we cannot draw a limit to thought, since we would thereby have to *think* the other side of that limit, and then thought would be beyond itself. However, we can (and must) draw a limit to our *expression* of thought in language. And because to know the limit of the expressible would be to know the inexpressible, we can only *show* but not *say* what those limits are.

The Strawsonian and Wittgensteinian points concern the very intelligibility of thinking (and therefore of knowing) beyond the realm which is thought's proper place. It might seem that this point works in favor, not against, one of the crucial Kantian insights that SR hopes to capture: namely, the insight that the spontaneity of judgment and the finitude of human reason are compatible, not at odds with one another. Let us look again at the following passage from McDowell:

If we understood Kant's theoretical philosophy, we would understand how to think about the limits of intelligibility—the bounds of sense, in one interpretation of P.F. Strawson's intentionally ambiguous title. That would put us within reach of an insight only glimpsed, I think, by Kant himself: that those limits are not well conceived as a boundary, enclosing a territory by leaving other territory outside it. (McDowell, 2009:108)

What McDowell suggests here is that while Kant believes he can, in some sense, draw limits to intelligibility, he does not believe that he can draw what we have been calling a true *boundary*. Kant himself explains in both the first *Critique* as well as the *Prolegomena* that he uses “limit” and “boundary” to mean different things (Prol, 4:354). To establish a limit does not require thinking anything on the other side of it. And indeed, this is aligned with McDowell's claim about what Kant “glimpses”: that to know the limits of intelligibility is not to know any territory beyond the limit. McDowell also points out that the title of Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense* is ambiguous. Strawson is interested in two ways in which Kant can be said to draw such bounds—as a limit to sensibility and as a limit to intelligibility generally, or what he refers to as the “lower” and “upper” bounds, respectively (Strawson, 1966:11-12).

Even if the *Critique of Pure Reason* only recognizes a *limit* to intelligibility generally, it does seek the determinate *boundaries* of knowledge. Kant is clear that those boundaries must be determined by reason (broadly) itself—i.e., self-consciously:

[The power of judgment] demands that reason should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions, and this not by mere decrees but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws; and this court is none other than the critique of pure reason itself [...] a critique of the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive independently of all experience, and hence the decision about the possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics in general, and the determination of its sources, as well as its extent and boundaries, all, however, from principles. (Axi-xii)

The understanding must not only *have* boundaries, and it must not only be able to *think* those boundaries, but it must determine its boundaries. Kant's insistence on this point stems from the thought that no *critique* of a faculty would be possible without having the whole of that faculty in view.¹³ As finite intellects, in order to know what the proper object of knowledge is, we have to exclude what is *not* the proper object. Without knowledge of the determinate boundaries of reason, Kant says, we would be treating reason as if it were a flat plane along which a constant search for such boundaries takes place. But he thinks this is the wrong picture of reason:

Our reason is not like an indeterminably extended plane, the limits of which one can cognize only in general, but must rather be compared with a sphere, the radius of which can be found out from the curvature of an arc on its surface (from the nature of synthetic *a priori* propositions), from which its content and its boundary can also be ascertained with certainty. Outside this sphere (field of experience) nothing is an object for it; indeed even questions about such supposed objects concern only subjective principles of a thoroughgoing determination of the relations that can obtain among the concepts of understanding inside of this sphere. (A762/B790)

¹³ Not properly as an object, for the self-knowledge of the transcendental “I” is not knowledge of an object.

Kant says that reason is not like a flat plane, but rather like a sphere. The excursion of knowledge across a flat plane would either go on reaching for its limits forever with no clear notion of where it must reign itself in, or fall over the edge of its plane, annihilating itself as knowledge of anything.

On the other hand, however, the Strawsonian or Wittgensteinian concern with drawing such a boundary can be a source of real anxiety. Putting aside the issue of whether it is indeed absurd for thinking to draw a boundary for itself, we might think that genuine self-limitation puts into jeopardy Kant's plan to reconcile spontaneity with rational human finitude. Again, it might initially seem as though the finitude of our intellect *must be* a limit to which we are passive. I now hope to show the way past this assumption by examining Kant's central example of a critique at work—namely, the example of knowing the determinate boundaries of knowledge via the concept of the noumenon.

6. Self-Limitation Through the Concept of the Noumenon

When I judge, I recognize my act as discursive, which is to say that I recognize it as involving a synthesis of concepts. This is important, because in recognizing my judgment as discursive, I also thereby recognize it as limited. When I judge that the table is brown, I do so through an act of limitation—that is, through separating from it what it is not (red, green, and so on). So, I already implicitly take my judgment to be a limited, i.e. finite, act.¹⁴

This idea, that the recognition of judgment's limitation is internal to the act of judging, is a notion of self-limitation; it is the determination of our judgment through an act of negation, of saying what is not the case. So, the thought of our intellect as finite is one we have through an act of negation. Moreover, this act of negation is distinct from mere self-affection. We do not encounter the limit of judgment passively in this case, but think it actively. As judgment is inseparable from acts of negation (as a separating of one concept from another), the spontaneity of judgment is only correctly understood through an understanding of this act by which we determine the finitude judgment. And, as we saw above, the way in which conceptual limitation is grasped is distinct from the way in which spatial or temporal limitation is grasped. If, as we have suggested, the form of sensory limitation corresponds to the kind of self-affection we see in SR, then in order to understand judgment's self-limitation, we have to understand it as distinct from the self-affection of SR.

Now, the implicit awareness of my judgment as finite necessarily involves Kant's distinction between mere thought and judgment. Kant says that we can think whatever we like as long as we do not contradict ourselves, but we may not judge whatever we like (Bxxxvi n.). The only constraint on thought as such is the principle of non-contradiction. When I judge that the table is brown, I exclude the table's being green, but I am free to think its being green. Indeed, in every judgment, as I recognize its finite character, I also think beyond what I judge. We know the limits of knowledge (and thought itself, though these are somewhat different matters) by always thinking *beyond* what is known in judgment. Every judgment as an act of self-conscious determination is also an act of exclusion. As such, every judgment is accompanied by the thought of what it is not—i.e., accompanied by an act of negation. And in an act of negation, we think what is not the case. To return to the point made above, our thought of what is not is, in every judgment, twofold: we exclude the contrary judgment (we are aware that other predicates do not apply), and we also necessarily frame what we judge as finite. To recognize what I judge to be finite is just to recognize it as requiring, or possibly requiring, justification. It is based on a reason that we may be fully or

¹⁴ I also recognize my judgment as resting on a reason. An awareness of the need for a sufficient reason (justification) is an awareness of the finitude of my act of judging.

only dimly aware of, but we are aware of the need of an answer to the question “why?”, which answer in turn will require a reason, and so on. This is the finitude of human knowledge.

Now we can see that the self-consciousness of judgment is also, in the same act, a consciousness of its finitude. The determination of what is true is at the same time an awareness of what I must not judge. And this awareness of what I must not judge is not a merely contingent accompaniment to my judgment. Insofar as I am capable of objectively valid judgment, I must recognize the finitude of my judgment. To return to what we said above, and ultimately to chapter one, the recognition of the finitude of my judgment is the recognition of my act of excluding contrary predicates from the subject of my judgment. And, in turn, this act of exclusion is not arbitrary, but done from an awareness of the necessity of so excluding. Thus, the recognition of the finitude of my judgment is also an awareness of my judgment’s resting on some ground upon which I *can* exclude contrary predicates. All of this yields a conception of the finitude of our intellect as internal to the self-consciousness of judgment. So, not even the manner in which I am limited as a knower may escape the I of self-consciousness. Indeed, it seems that rational human finitude is only intelligible through the I of self-consciousness.

The above points are borne out in the Phenomena and Noumena chapter of the first *Critique*, where Kant calls the noumenon a “limiting” concept and proceeds to divide it into two species: the concept of the negative noumenon and the concept of the positive noumenon. The negative noumenon is the concept of something that is not an object of our sensible intuition, whereas the positive noumenon is the concept of something that is an object of a non-sensible intuition (B307). Kant then writes:

Now the doctrine of sensibility is at the same time the doctrine of the noumenon in the negative sense, i.e., of things that the understanding must think without this relation to our kind of intuition, thus not merely as appearances but as things in themselves, but about which, however, it also understands that in this abstraction it cannot consider making any use of its categories, since they have significance only in relation to the unity of intuitions in space and time, and can even determine its unity *a priori* through general concepts of combination only on account of the mere ideality of space and time. (B307-308)

Why is the doctrine of sensibility the doctrine of the negative noumenon? It is because in knowing that we know only *appearances*, we must think the possibility of objects which do not correspond to our sensible intuition (the categories must reach beyond our sensible intuition, even if they cannot cognize beyond it). This is an act of negation or self-limitation—that is, an act which limits the pretenses of our sensible cognition. By reaching beyond our sensible capacity, we know the determinate boundaries of sensibility.

On the other hand, in thinking the spontaneity of the understanding we must also thereby think the idea of an infinite (intuitive) intellect. In order to understand our own mode of spontaneity, which rests on sensible conditions, we must understand the idea of a spontaneity which is sufficient for its cognition. The idea of an infinite intellect is the idea of an intuitive self-consciousness, one relying on nothing given whatsoever, and thus one that brings forth its own content. As this kind of self-consciousness knows everything merely through thinking itself (without receptivity), it knows the finite intellect merely through thinking itself. The infinite intellect would not know the finite intellect as it is anyway, because in thinking the infinite intellect we cannot think anything existing independently of it. Thus, from the thought of spontaneity as such, we think the finite intellect as the self-finitization of the infinite intellect. Now, this self-finitization is nothing other than the idea of the positive noumenon—the idea of an object of an

infinite intellect. Thus, in thinking the nature of our finite intellect, we think our spontaneity as the self-finitization of the infinite intellect, even if we do not thereby pretend to *cognize* such a possibility. We do not, then, assert any such possibility, but merely think it.

If this is right, then we can begin to see how Kant avoids thinking that our knowledge is *relative* to that of an infinite intellect in a way that would make our finite knowledge less than objective. Thinking the unknowability of our forms of intuition involves thinking the noumenon as a boundary concept. But thinking the noumenon as a boundary concept is nothing but an act of negation—that is, of thinking what we cannot know, and thereby limiting our cognition. In and of itself, thinking what we cannot know is *not* thinking something that bears a standard of reality or objectivity which cannot be reached by us. I will finish by considering why this is the case.

Noumena are not, as it is sometimes supposed, objects of reality to which our sensibility simply fails to extend.¹⁵ Instead, following the original Greek, noumena are literally *beings of the understanding*.¹⁶ As such, noumena are those beings the knowledge of which could only be had by an intuitive understanding—an infinite intellect. We have no insight into the possibility of a being with intuitive understanding, but we can think it. As such, we can think the possibility of noumena. In fact, we *must* think noumena in order to limit the pretensions of sensibility. Kant says:

In the end, however, we have no insight into the possibility of such *noumena*, and the domain outside of the sphere of appearances is empty (for us), i.e., we have an understanding that extends farther than sensibility problematically. The concept of a noumenon is therefore merely a boundary concept, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility, and therefore only of negative use. But it is nevertheless not invented arbitrarily, but is rather connected with the limitation of sensibility, yet without being able to posit anything positive outside of the domain of the latter. (A255/B310-311)

The understanding's limitation of sensibility through the concept of a noumenon does not involve the positing of anything positive beyond the domain of sensibility. The "domain" beyond the boundary is, for us, empty.¹⁷ Now, we must be especially careful here, because the terms "boundary" and "limit" have different meanings for Kant. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant is clear that he uses "limit" to denote the merely negative act of preventing judgment from going further than it should; whereas he uses "boundary" to denote not something merely negative, but something that is also positive.¹⁸ A boundary is more like a line, itself a space with another side to it. And it is not enough for us to merely *limit* sensibility. If we are to avoid both dogmatic rationalism and skeptical empiricism, we must know the determinate bounds of our knowledge.

The idea of a boundary, as Kant has noted, seems to imply that we can think what is on the other side of that boundary. Wittgenstein points to what he thinks is an absurd idea, that we could draw a boundary to *thought*. For, in drawing a boundary in thought, we should also have to *think* the other side of the boundary. As such, there is apparently no such boundary. But Kant's claim is that we must draw a boundary, not to thought as such, but to knowledge. We *can* think the other

¹⁵ Cf. (Strawson, 1966: 267), who takes Kant to hold that noumena are "objectively real" objects.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the following note appears in Kant's copy of the first edition of the first *Critique*: "*Noumena*: beings that themselves have understanding, also causality with regard to the objects of their understanding through the understanding itself" (A235/B294).

¹⁷ In the *Prolegomena* Kant calls this "the void" or "empty space" (*Leeren*) (Prol, 4:354).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

side of the boundary in forming the concept of a noumenon. Moreover, in thinking beyond the boundary of knowledge, we are not thereby *extending the field of real objects*. So, as Kant immediately goes on to say:

The division of objects into *phaenomena* and *noumena*, and of the world into a world of sense and a world of understanding, can therefore not be permitted at all in a positive sense, although concepts certainly permit of division into sensible and intellectual ones; for one cannot determine any object for the latter, and therefore also cannot pass them off as objectively valid [...] Now in this way our understanding acquires a negative expansion, i.e., it is not limited by sensibility, but rather limits it by calling things in themselves (not considered as appearances) *noumena*. (B307-308)

What Kant says here is instructive. We cannot divide *real objects* into phenomena and noumena, cordoning off the latter as unreachable for us. Rather, our understanding acquires a *negative expansion*, which is to say that it circumscribes sensibility so as to say: ‘go no further,’ but without *positing* a new class of objects. It is also important to note what Kant says in parentheses, which may at first sound trivial (of course; it would be a contradiction to call *appearances* noumena). He seems here to be warning us not to assume that when we speak of noumena, we are speaking of real objects existing independently of our form of knowledge. By assuming something of this sort, we would only be appropriating materials from within the sphere of experience:

Outside this sphere (field of experience) nothing is an object for it; indeed even questions about such supposed objects concern only subjective principles of a thoroughgoing determination of the relations that can obtain among the concepts of understanding inside of this sphere. (A762/B790)

We draw a boundary to knowledge (through the understanding itself) without thereby positing any real objects on the other side of that boundary. But, in a sense, we also do not posit any objects *at all*. The noumenon, for one, is not the object of a finite intellect. In thinking the noumenon, we are really reflecting on our finitude. So, even in the thought of something beyond the bounds of our knowledge, we are not thinking the idea of a class of objects from which we are cut off. Instead, we are thinking the boundary between the finite and the infinite intellect.

It is important, then, to learn two things from these considerations: (1) our cognitive self-limitation is through an act of *negation*—that is, through thinking what is *not* (this means that the understanding has conceptual unity rather than a kind of spatial unity), and (2) the act of thinking a negation does not *expand* our knowledge, but only limits it. Kant says our understanding “acquires a *negative expansion*,” but by this he does not mean that it expands through negation; rather, he means that the expansion is not one of positing further objects.

As we have learned, the activity of understanding—spontaneity—is the most fundamental aspect of knowledge per se, whether in God or in human beings. Like God, we know spontaneously; but unlike God, we require the objects of knowledge to be given to us. Noumena, then, are beings only God could know, but they are not thereby beings alien to the understanding. The understanding, as a human capacity, is limited; but it is not thereby *alien* to that of an infinite intellect.¹⁹

¹⁹ For Kant there are no “logical aliens,” meaning that it is not possible to conceive of beings that have a different form of understanding. So, we do not have an understanding that is *alien* from God’s, but merely one that is limited (finite, and as Kant says, “empty”). For more on this theme, see (Conant, 1991).

It is also important to return to the idea, explored earlier, that the perspective of empirical apperception is ineliminable. Because we are finite intellects, we know only under conditions of sensibility. Even if we do not know *from* sensibility, we always know *with* it, so to speak. And this is just to return to the very first sentence of the first *Critique*'s Introduction: that all knowledge *begins* with but does not thereby *arise* from experience. It is part and parcel of knowing *with* sensibility that our knowledge is accompanied by experience in inner sense. This surely contributes to the difficulty of being able to comprehend the idea that we are self-limiting, for we can never fully escape the limited view from empirical apperception. To put it another way, we are always at once the "I" of pure self-consciousness (the "I" that itself is limitless) and the "I" of empirical self-consciousness (the I that is inside the limits of space and time).

7. Conclusion

We are now in a position to see both *that* the form of self-limitation associated with spontaneous-receptivity is insufficient to account for the way in which judgment is involved in the determination of the limits of knowledge, and also *how* we can see this. We see it, namely, by understanding how self-consciousness can be a determination of cognitive limits *through* nothing but its consciousness of those limits. The self-consciousness of thought (i.e., of conceptuality) is formally *complete* insofar as it sets limits to knowledge within the very thought of those limits. This enables us to conceive of a form of self-consciousness which, for Kant, converges with self-limitation in a way that it cannot if we conceive of the highest form of self-consciousness—the transcendental "I"—as identical with the capacity of pure imagination. By understanding the self-limitation of the understanding through the role of the noumenon as a limiting concept, we also see that without this distinction with spontaneous-receptivity, we do not have a chance to get into view the notion of critique that is at the heart of Kant's philosophy.

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