

Jan Völker*

The *I think* and Its Imaginary Unity

1. Three problems in, not for, Kant

If we read Kant today we need to abandon all uniformity of a history of philosophy. Otherwise what do we read? We examine only a shattered fragment of the past of thought. A fragment that – as being believed to belong to the past – is inscribed in an ideological history of thought that comes along with its own presuppositions: a history composed of thoughts that are read as facts of thought, be it even in the form of soft facts of thought, such as currents, convictions, conditions of its time. We would have to read Kant as an expression of a certain time, at a secure distance from the time in which we read. That is the work of a reality principle that keeps thoughts at a distance, by placing them in a history without actual being. History as a history of thoughts, not incidentally an idea of the 19th century, is an attempt to find regulations, to find an order in a moment in which the world seemed to be endangered as well as on the threshold of becoming a new world. Being such a reality principle, history does not concern only the past, but it is equally the present that it seeks to manage. Treating thoughts as completely swallowed up in their past is a conception that equally signals the urgency to keep those thoughts from the present. It is an attempt to bar their effectiveness. Besides all self-evident moments of distance between our thought and the thought of Kant – his inscription into another time – the perspective of the history of thought also presents the exclusion of these very thoughts from any contemporary effectiveness.

But is Kant's work still effective today? Kant's work represents the threshold between the breaking up of something new and the exuberant will to restructure, anew, and secure the ordering features of thought. Thought as such is set to the test of attesting to the new – Newtonian science, but also the French Revolution – and integrating it into a set of ordered understanding. History, for Kant, is a matter of synthesis. Synthesis is thought. What then might be overcome in the realm of thought? It is said that Kant not only built his philosophy on an account

*University of Arts, Berlin

of the natural sciences that we would generally consider to be out-dated, but that he also established certain moral views that we perhaps would even mock today. It can be said that our world seems to be a completely different one from the world in and out of which Kant's philosophy was written. Kant's world was with the French Revolution at the threshold of modern civilisation, and globalisation as we are facing it today was only taking its first steps in the form of an expansion of cross-boarder trade. It was rather a world with different contradictions than ours, a world in which colonialism (which Kant criticised) was alive, while an influential professor like Kant still dedicated his works to the Prussian king. Science has developed, history has developed, and Kant might serve as an inspiration for philosophical thought, but our world is clearly no longer his. But is thought reducible to the facts upon which it is thought, or are there periods of thought that last longer than the facts of history that change in them?

A first orientation in this confusion is to be taken from a distinction that was of utmost importance to the Kantian philosophy itself: This is the distinction between *knowledge* and *thought*. While the Kantian project intended to unfold the conditions of our knowledge about the world – how we perceive and understand *phenomena* – Kant held *thought* to be both distinguished from this knowledge and equally necessary for understanding the world. We can know about phenomena according to our transcendental apparatus, but about the limits of our experiences themselves we cannot know but only think, or, even stronger, we *have* to think, for otherwise the transcendental apparatus would be dysfunctional, it would run wild. This limit position of the phenomenon is its *noumenal* underside, the transcendental object. This problematic blind spot of our knowledge sticks not only with the single thing, but it repeats itself in relation to the connection of things, to the grounds of this connection, and to the combination of these grounds and the totality of things into a whole. A consequence of the impossibility of knowledge of the thing in its totality will be the necessity of ideas – ideas of thought, which allow us to keep the unity of the subject, the world, and of the whole intact. Ideas cannot be knowledge and therefore only have a regulative function. Thought in this sense does not concern the facts, but the organisation of facts. Thoughts exceed facts without having a factual reality of their own. The *conditions of the possibility* of knowledge, however, do not depend on the actual status of the world, but they rather enable any knowledge of it at all. Therefore, also the thoughts that confine these necessary conditions cannot be said to be thoughts of their time.

If we consider philosophy from the perspective of knowledge, we may be able to distinguish between parts that might be worth reconsidering and parts belonging to an overcome ideology – overcome mainly in the course of our technical, scientific, and moral developments. But the problem, as it appears with Kant, is that the changes in knowledge do not necessarily imply or indicate changes in thought. And this is a problem that appears specifically with Kant: For the ‘Copernican Revolution’ intends to understand our mind as not following the things outside of it, but rather as prefiguring their possibilities of appearance to us. Before Kant, change was possible as a change in the world; with Kant change can no longer easily be referred to as a change in the world, as it is our transcendental apparatus that sets the conditions for change. This allows for change to take place on the level of the cognised (knowledge), but opens the question of change on the level of cognition (thought). This then is the first problem: Given the transcendental frame of our knowledge, it is not clear whether there can be any such change in knowledge that also induces a change in this transcendental frame. But Kant himself considers his own system to be a consequence of a “revolution in the way of thinking,”¹ thereby following a radical change in the conception of knowledge that changed not only knowledge, but its very fundamental conditions. Thus, the question of whether there is change in thought is a problem not for Kant, but rather in Kant: the transcendental apparatus marks the inner threshold in Kant, it is a consequence of knowledge and it is its foundation. Even if Kant considers transcendental philosophy to be a general philosophy of cognition, it is nevertheless clear that he also considers the *Critique of Pure Reason* to be the fruit of developments, especially those of early modern science.

But here, one might alter and refine the question: Would it not be possible that the transcendental setting is changed but that there is still a need to accept a transcendental setting as such? That the transcendental setting in the end consists in the necessity that there is such a setting at all? Thus, the question becomes whether the *distinction* between knowledge and its necessary thought continues to hold even if the thought might change – or whether even this distinction could be undermined. Could a change in knowledge so radical arise that there would no longer be a necessity to think the foundations of knowledge

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 108 (B xii).

as such? For Kant, this would be what he understood ‘intuitive intuition’ to be, a God-like intuition in which what we know overlaps with what we are. In the present time, biotechnical engineering implies this threat and promise: to be able to fix the gap by generating a knowledge that could manipulate our ways of thinking and grounding this very knowledge.

If an anthropological thesis makes a claim about the human capacity of cognition beyond historical conditions, then this is the actual anthropological claim: not that this specific transcendental apparatus structures human cognition, but that human cognition presupposes the capacity to think. That implies that the human being is a thinking being before any act of cognition has taken place. The next problem is that, from a Kantian point of view, in a general manner, thought cannot be accounted for *apart* from the transcendental realm. It can be understood as the necessary transcendental apparatus, but it cannot be understood as the thought founding the transcendental apparatus itself. This is completely within the Kantian intention, as for Kant the transcendental apparatus is the foundation of thought, and it makes no sense – in a Kantian understanding – to think this thought itself. It is, again, a problem not for Kant, but rather in Kant: Because Kant’s account seems to latently imply the anthropological condition. It is *latent* – as there is no place at which it is accounted for. But it is latent – as the Kantian framework seems to presuppose the capacity to think. The transcendental apparatus is understood to be the setting of the possibility of human cognition. The transcendental axiom is: If there is human cognition, then only on the condition of *X*. The problem lies in the *then only*. The condition follows the fact of knowledge: there is knowledge, and then it can be said that it is on the condition of *X*. But if cognition is only possible on the condition of *X*, then this condition is not retroactively created, but retroactively stabilised, *retroactively unified*. It is not retroactively created because it is indicated as a unified apparatus. Were it created, then there would only be two possibilities: either there is only one knowledge, and this then refers back to one transcendental apparatus, or there are different knowledges and they retroactively create different sets of conditions. Different sets of conditions (of knowledge) are absolutely thinkable, but not within the Kantian framework. It sets out with the question of how it is possible that human knowledge is as *one* coordinated network. And the answer – that this is possible on the condition of the transcendental apparatus – is in its unification already inscribed in the question. The transcendental apparatus, the capacity to think, is presupposed.

One could thus start with the human capacity to think and define it as the transcendental apparatus. This is what Kant wants to avoid, for he would then have to make a metaphysical claim before being able to analyse its very possibility. Or one could start with the question of how a given cognition is made possible and then describe these conditions as the conditions of its possibility. This is the Kantian procedure: “Experience is without doubt the first product that our understanding brings forth as it works on the raw material of sensible sensations” – this is how the *Critique of Pure Reason* begins.²

But if these conditions become in the next step the conditions not of a given cognition but of *any* given cognition without underlying change in the further development, then these transcendental conditions are indirectly turned into a description of a set that exists before and independent of the cognition to be made. This set, the transcendental set, has a dubious existence: According to the laws of transcendental reason, it cannot be accounted for, but it nevertheless insists, it has an existence before existence. It is, in other words, what the transcendental apparatus wants to *be*, wants to *exist*. The transcendental apparatus as a unified apparatus wishes itself to be and to exist. It is a machine to fulfil one wish, the wish of unity.

It can be said that Kant knew about this problem and thought to resolve it. He seeks to eliminate it by understanding foundation as limitation.

But it will be asked: What sort of treasure is it that we intend to leave to posterity, in the form of a metaphysics that has been purified through criticism but thereby also brought into a changeless state? On a cursory overview of this work, one might believe that one perceives it to be only of *negative* utility, teaching us never to venture with speculative reason beyond the boundaries of experience; and in fact that is its first usefulness. But this utility soon becomes *positive* when we become aware that the principles with which speculative reason ventures beyond its boundaries do not in fact result in *extending* our use of reason, but rather, if one considers them more closely, inevitably result in *narrowing* it by threatening to extend the boundaries of sensibility, to which these principles

² *Ibid.*, p. 127 (A1).

really belong, beyond everything, and so even to dislodge the use of pure (practical) reason.³

Thus the critique is positive precisely because it prevents reason from losing itself. It is positive also because otherwise the overstepping of the boundaries of sensibility that is then again necessary for the moral aim would be impossible. Misuse of reason, extending its boundaries, would actually cut it down. Knowing its borders, on the other hand, enables the development of true knowledge. Therefore, radically continued, there cannot be any true knowledge without circumspection of the borders of reason. We have to start from the limitations of reason, i.e. we have to start from its finitude, to enable knowledge to develop. From this point of view, the first problem appears to be a pseudo problem: The development of knowledge cannot stretch, widen, or change its ordinary grounds that conditions it. Also it can never overstep these boundaries and undermine the necessity to think its own foundation. Rather, once the limitations are thought through, knowledge can develop freely in all different directions. But while the first problem is reduced to a pseudo-problem, the problem of the dubiousness of the beginning now seems to be an even more ‘official’ problem. Insofar as any use of reason necessitates the previous determination of its possibilities, there arises the need for the determination of the possibility to limit and ground the work of thought. The limitation of what and on what grounds? For Kant, this is already the work of the transcendental apparatus. There is no beyond. But even more than a gesture of foundation, a gesture of limitation presupposes ‘something before’, something to be limited. But both problems – the pseudo-problem and the problem of dubiousness – have a right to exist on their own, because they concern the possibility of a change in thought.

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Kant felt able to give a rather complete list of components of the thus limited and founded realm of reason, not only of the categories that enable knowledge to unfold, but also of the ideas that confine the realm of knowledge as such. It is here that a third problem arises, one that refines the first two problems. It is not a problem for Kant that he would have to account for the source of the categories and the ideas: They stem from the realm of the given and possible knowledge in so far as they mark their logical possibility. If he can prove this, he does not need to prove the source. They are retroactively deduced. Their sys-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 114 (B XXIV-XXV).

tematic interrelation, their systematic unity, however, implies a unity in the given knowledge from which this unity is taken. But Kant will claim that it is rather the transcendental apparatus that organises the unity of experiences. While on the one hand Kant deduces the necessary structures of our cognition that have to be set in place before any such cognition can take place, the inference about the unity of these cognitions, on the other hand, seems to have a different status, it seems to be para-transcendental. The transcendental apparatus would collapse if Kant could not argue for the unity of experiences. But if the transcendental apparatus describes the necessary conditions of possible experiences, then the unity of these experiences is already presupposed, and it is assumed that the transcendental apparatus necessarily needs to be one. Not only the givenness of the transcendental apparatus seems to be presupposed (as in the second problem), but also and especially its unity. If the argument regarding transcendental conditions only referred to a partial knowledge, allowing for other knowledges to exist alongside it, then the transcendental argument would lose its stability. But an unstable transcendental apparatus loses its grounds – on what basis could human understanding account for it? The need for another argument arises, one that allows for the explanation of the relation or non-relation between these knowledges. It would necessitate a meta-transcendental argument, and we are thrown back to the transcendental question as such. Only that it is now a meta-transcendental apparatus that would have to solve the conflict between the parallel transcendental sub-apparatuses. The intention to “solve the conflict” at this point already indicates that there is no escape to the transcendental demand for stability as unity, once this unity is inscribed as its inner aim. Thus, the presupposition of the existence and the unity of the transcendental apparatus are correlative. Thought is, and it is one. Dubious in its beginning, thought itself is conceived to be one, in a para-transcendental manner: the possibility of the transcendental apparatus is the oneness of thought that begins in the transcendental.

This third problem rightfully occurs insofar as it questions not only the possibility of change in thought, but it questions its unity and the possibility of a true multiplicity in thought. If there is change and history in thought, these might become multiple as well. The three problems together – the pseudo-problem of change, the dubiousness of a beginning, and the para-transcendentalism of the unity – are bound to the priority of the given experience. Not to the experience as sensible information, but the hypothetical givenness of something in the be-

ginning. Thus, the conditions out of which the three problems arise cannot be conditions of the unknown, but rather are conditions of the known. Immanently, they are thus set against the unknown and against any incoherence on this account. The unity of the transcendental apparatus and its experiences present the strongest defence, and in precisely this manner they can be said to present the unknown in the midst of the facts. As a defence, they present a remainder of the threat of the unknown, and in this source they are themselves unknown. The consequence is twofold: As the point of the unknown it might not even be possible to deduce their effectiveness in the present as we know it. But then this point also presents itself as something that structurally falls outside of the system that it creates. From this point on the direction changes, a unity is set into motion against the unknown, to build the secured city of knowledge, in which its citizens are united: the polis of knowledge. Reason, as its founding moment, is therefore in its own unity neither an illegal act nor is it a strictly legal act in the sense of the transcendental courthouse. It can be neither an illegal nor a legal act, because it stands at the founding moment of the legality of the city of reason as such. It cannot be a metaphysical act, as it does not have ancestors, it rather demarcates the moment of dis/enabling metaphysical acts as such. It cannot be an individual act, because it grounds the moment in which the threshold of individuality is founded, as such. It therefore is precisely what since modernity has been called a revolutionary act. Dubious in its beginning, rejecting its own historicisation as a pseudo-problem, and stating the unity of all. As a revolutionary act, it does not have an origin, there is no cause that necessarily brought it about. And if it surpasses itself, then it might surpass its own history as well, there is no reason that could hinder this excess of a point of excess. As a revolutionary act, it founds its own history, but it immanently surpasses it because it is always already more than this history.

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The question, then, is whether this first moment, the moment of unity, the founding and grounding moment, surpasses itself in such a manner that it contradicts its own finitude. Whether there is a moment in the founding unity that is left unsatisfied. Is there something going on in thought that does not come to an end. If this is the case, then the Kantian philosophy itself might be unsatisfied, and therefore not even at the point at which it could be overcome, if it is not even what it is.

2. The operation of the *I think*

The question of the unity is then not only of relevance to the systematic structure of the transcendental apparatus and its experiences, but also relates to the Kantian philosophy as such. On account of what can a philosophy be split? How can a division be marked that allows it to be proven that some of its moments are of actuality, while others are not? From the point of view of consistency, it should not be possible to uphold some parts and dismiss others. A philosophy needs to fail or persist in its totality. But is it possible to make such a distinction without contradicting the consistency of a given philosophy?

In Kant, the inner kernel of this unity is the so-called transcendental apperception, i.e. the *I think*. There cannot be a contradiction in the *I think* just as there cannot be a contradiction between the *I think* and the philosophical unfolding of the transcendental structure of reason. This is the task of the famous deduction: showing that it is the unity of our self what makes appearances possible. But is there a difference between the transcendental apparatus – the set of categories – and the transcendental self?

If the transcendental structure is called the systematicity of transcendental philosophy – its building, its scope, its perimeter –, and the *I think* the transcendental I, and it is assumed that for Kant the unity is not a result, but rather an inner point of beginning, then, as a hypothesis, the claim of the lines that follow will be that the systematicity is a result of the imaginary construction of the I. But then the I itself would prove to have an imaginary structure, the self itself would be an operation, and the ensuing systematicity would be its projection. The hypothesis implies that there is something going on in the I, as well as between the I as the source of unity, and the systematicity of the whole as its projection. This implies that the point of the unknown in the transcendental apparatus is a structure, and this structure is called the transcendental I.

Kant placed enormous weight on the transcendental I: According to one well known phrase, the “*I think* must *be able* to accompany all my representations, for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impos-

sible or else at least would be nothing for me.”⁴ Clearly, this *I think* is not to be mistaken for a marker of consciousness or any other form of empirical awareness, it is a technical, non-empirical condition that establishes the necessary possibility of a relation of all thought to the unifying point of the *I think*. The *I think* is the guarantee not only of the possibility of experience, but also, for Kant, it holds the unity of nature.⁵ Therefore, this *I think* – the synthetic unity of apperception, as Kant calls it – is the cornerstone of transcendental philosophy, its most important concept, and the frame that holds the transcendental apparatus together. “[T]he synthetic unity of apperception is the highest point to which one must affix all use of the understanding, even the whole of logic and, after it, transcendental philosophy; indeed this faculty is the understanding itself.”⁶

It is already inscribed in the first very basic set of conditions of any experience, the difference and co-relation of time and space. For any intuition that we can have, the object of that intuition needs to be placed in space and time, this is how the *Critique of Pure Reason* begins. A pure intuition, i.e. without any empirical content, will find space and time as its absolute conditions. Space is the reference of what Kant calls our “outer sense”, while time “is a *determination of inner sense*”⁸. Inside and outside, this is thus the first main difference without which there would be no possible experience. It is inside that the I is to be found, in time: “Time is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our self and our inner state. For time cannot be a determination of outer appearances; it belongs neither to a shape or a position, etc., but on the contrary determines the relation of representations in our inner state.”⁹ If we intuit ourselves in time – which implies that we are only able to cognise ourselves as an appearance – how then does this intuited self relate to the transcendental apperception? It is crucial to avoid confusing them. For Kant, the *I think* is the objective condition of any intuition in general, while time is its subjective form. We intuit ourselves as passive subjects, as being affected by the enactment of

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246 (B 131–132).

⁵ As Henrich underlines. David S. Pacini (ed.): *Dieter Henrich: Between Kant and Hegel. Lectures on German Idealism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 22.

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 247 (B 134).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174 (A 22, B37).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250 (B 139).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180 (A 33, B49–50)

the synthesis. We cognise ourselves as an appearance, but not as what we are in itself. The foundational I, the I that founds the inside, remains unknown.

Kant distinguishes the empirical cognition of oneself from the transcendental unity of this act again in terms of thought and knowledge: As for appearance, we can receive a knowledge of ourselves as to how we appear to ourselves, but the transcendental synthesis of the *I think* makes me “conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only *that* I am. This *representation* is a *thinking*, not an *intuiting*.”¹⁰ That is to say, that while I have to have the capacity to generate complex unities of diverse manifolds, I will not be able to present a unity of myself as generating these unities.

The structure of the object correlates with this twofold notion of the subject. The transcendental apparatus produces representations, apart from which we do not know anything about the thing as it is in itself. “What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us.”¹¹ The thing in itself, to be distinguished from the transcendental object as well as from the *noumenon*, is the thing insofar as there cannot be any knowledge of it, i.e. it can only be thought, it is a pure *Gedankending*. Transcendental cognition of appearances necessitates a contrast against which the appearance is a mere appearance. As Allison summarises:

Accordingly, the ‘absurdity’ to which Kant alludes may be more appropriately characterized as considering something as it appears, or as appearing (in the transcendental sense), without, at the same time, contrasting this with the thought of how it may be in itself (in the same sense). In fact, these contrasting ways of considering an object are simply two sides of the same act of transcendental reflection, an act that Kant describes as ‘a duty from which no one can escape if he would judge anything about things *a priori*’ (A263 I B319).¹²

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It is the same contrast that is necessary for the transcendental I. In another famous passage, Kant inscribes the thing into the I, and opens the way for the thing that thinks:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259 (B 157).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168 (A 42).

¹² Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, revised and enlarged edition 2004, p. 56.

Through this I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = x, which is recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and about which, in abstraction, we can never have even the least concept; because of which we therefore turn in a constant circle, since we must always already avail ourselves of the representation of it at all times in order to judge anything about it; we cannot separate ourselves from this inconvenience, because the consciousness in itself is not even a representation distinguishing a particular object, but rather a form of representation in general, insofar as it is to be called a cognition, for of it alone can I say that through it I think anything.¹³

The thing that thinks cannot appear to me, and it cannot appear to be me, in this sense it is voided of any possible phenomenality. But it is the necessary point of all possible cognition, it is a 'form of representation in general', and therefore it is the source of the unity not only of an experience, but also of the experiences altogether. It is therefore not totally voided of any possible concepts, as it precisely presents an originary unity. This ungiven unity can be understood to be imaginary: it is said to be necessary and to not have grounds of its own. The 'circle' in which we 'constantly turn' is in reality the to and fro between the necessity of the unity and its groundlessness, its being unknown. We are sent back to it without any alternative, as we are already partaking in its consequences. Thus, imaginary is not the form in which we partake, but the unity and fixity of this very form. Here it becomes also clear why this point is actually a process: If it were not a process, there would be no difference between the form in which we partake and the content we produce. They would fall into one. Then, either no cognition or divine intuition would result, both are to be avoided. The circle Kant describes is not a Hegelian circle of contradiction, it is the necessity to always again take the same impossible step: to understand what is already implied in understanding. As there then needs to be a difference, there also needs to be a distance, "since we must always already avail ourselves of the representation of it at all times in order to judge anything about it."¹⁴ To understand this point to be only an *inner* difference would in the end leave the possibility that both sides are actually the same. Therefore, if we want to 'judge anything about it' – and of course we want to, otherwise we would be left without grounds for our thoughts –

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¹³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 414 (A 346, B404).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

we already have to make use of it. We have to go there, but we are always already there. The point of the *I think* guarantees that in which we are already partaking, and therefore it guarantees precisely that there is nothing else. This unity – that there is nothing else that would not fit – is imaginary and has to be affirmed in every act of thought as a guarantee of this thought itself.

There are two problems that arise from this originary constellation of the process of the imaginary I. The first is the question of how to understand this process of the *imaginary*. The second is how to understand this *process* of the imaginary. The first is famously in the focus of Heidegger's analysis. The second figures in Adorno's attempt to understand the Kantian I to be always already a plural, a *We*.

3. Heidegger's domestication of the imaginary

Heidegger's deliberately forced interpretation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* seeks to establish Kant's endeavour as that of a revision of metaphysics with the aim of providing an ontological account of the possibility of knowledge as such. 'Ontological' insofar as Kant, in Heidegger's view, is concerned with the conditions of ontic being as such. Within this frame, Heidegger seeks to understand the synthesis of imagination as the most important hinge to which the transcendental construction as such is attached. Kant's construction of an originary cognition comprises, for Heidegger, three moments: sensibility, understanding, and imagination. But the last of these, imagination, alternates in its status. The *Critique of Pure Reason* oscillates, as Heidegger shows, between the acknowledgment of two or three parts that form the transcendental apparatus of cognition. There are, according to a famous passage in the *Critique* "two basic sources of the mind, sensibility and understanding," as Heidegger quotes Kant.¹⁵ Heidegger's aim is to show that the power of imagination is the common ground that not only unites these sources, but also allows them to separate at first. Thus the imagination repeats the fundamental figure ascribed to the unfolding of being-as-being: to ground and to dirempt. This procedure, developed in the Kantian frame, entails a set of decisive consequences for the construction of reason, but especially so for the status of the *I think*.

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, transl. Richard Taft, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990, 1997, p. 95.

The unity of cognition can only be comprehended in the Kantian conception of the originary synthesis. While in the ‘official’ understanding of Kant this synthesis combines the side of possible intuition and possible understanding before any empirical content is yet given, for Heidegger, the first that needs to be mentioned is that this synthesis does not find a priority in one of its sides:

Now pure intuition in itself, however – as the representing of a unified whole – is already something like an intuiting unifying. Thus Kant speaks with justification of a ‘Synopsis’ in intuition. At the same time, the analysis of the notion as a ‘reflecting concept’ has proven that pure thinking as representing the pure unities is in itself originally giving of unity, and in this sense it is ‘synthetic’.¹⁶

Thus, on both sides the originary unification as *a giving unity* is to be found. And of course, in Heidegger’s view, the unifying moment is of greater importance than the unified. But Kant, although he proves the unifying moment to be neither one of intuition nor of thought, solves the riddle, as Heidegger somewhat disappointedly remarks, by ascribing a priority to the concept.

But in which transcendental discipline, then, does the discussion of the central problem of the possibility of ontology fall? This question remains foreign to Kant. He assigns not only the elucidation of the pure concepts as elements of pure knowledge, but also the determination and grounding of the essential unity of pure knowledge to the ‘Analytic of Concepts.’ In this way, logic maintains an incomparable priority over the aesthetic, whereas, on the other hand, it is precisely intuition which is presented as primary in knowledge as a whole.¹⁷

In the latter remark, Heidegger’s project is clearly indicated: The reversal of the priority from the preference of the notion to the preference of intuition is not simply a correction of the Kantian structure, rather the reason for this correction is already inherent in the Kantian edifice. At a certain point there is a fissure in this edifice, Kant deviates from the way he himself set out. While this opening of a difference might seem dialectic, Heidegger’s focus is not to spell out this contradiction in itself, but rather to develop and follow this implicit different way, to take the turn that Kant refigured, but rejected. It is at this point that

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42–43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46–47.

Heidegger's interpretation takes a turn that he himself considered to be of a certain 'violence'.¹⁸

The most important premise for this endeavour is to understand the full scope of the finitude of cognition, upon which the Kantian conception is built. Cognition is finite as it can only cognise something that it has itself not created, and therefore that which is to be cognised needs to *be*, before it is cognised. Cognition depends on the being object, and this marks its finitude. When Heidegger then conceives of a "basic faculty of a turning-toward"¹⁹ to be an original and necessary faculty of human cognition, this turning-toward can also be understood as a turning-toward finitude, and therefore its opening and construction. But as cognition it is based on the originary unity that first of all allows the something of cognition to be cognised. Therefore the turning-toward cannot yet turn toward a being, but it is turning toward a nothing that is nevertheless something. It is a turning-toward that which "lets-[something]-stand-in-opposition."²⁰ This remarkable figure presents a posture rather than any kind of reflection, and it is important that Heidegger conceives of the very first moment of cognition as of a Gestalt, as it implicitly already marks the prevalence of the corpus of being. Cognition has a corpus before it cognises. On the basis of this originary finitude – not as being there from the beginning, but rather as being realised in the beginning, as *being* the beginning – Heidegger then will understand intuition to be originally productive and understanding to be receptive.

Cognition depends on intuition and as well needs to define what it is that is cognised. The question of the unity of cognition can therefore not arise in this process but has to be given beforehand. This unity is characterised as a "multiform action," for Heidegger it is not an "empty simplicity of an ultimate principle."²¹ Kant then examines two different ways to think this originary unity in the transcendental deduction. The first is given in the so-called transcendental apperception, the unity of the *I think*. But this unity itself needs a unifying principle, and the relation between transcendental apperception and imagination becomes clearer when Kant begins the 'second way', now beginning from the empirical grounds. It is here that Heidegger can clearly denote that "this power –

¹⁸ In the preface to the second edition. *Ibid.*, p. xx.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

which first and foremost ‘forms’ relations – is the pure power of imagination.”²² This capacity of formation is inscribed into the transcendental apperception, but as the “previous representing of unity.”²³ As at this point the transcendental apperception already includes the necessary process of a “pure forming” [“*reines Bilden*”] and a “previous representing” [“*vorgängiges Vorstellen*”]²⁴, it becomes clear that a process of formation is taking place in the transcendental apperception, and that this process is the process of imagination in the sense of producing, forming a non-representative image. An image is produced that actually is a constellation, a corpus – a relation between cognition and the to-be-cognised, but a relation taken in its corporeal unity. It is a constellation also in that sense, in that it is a “double forming” as it also proceeds “like an ‘image’.”²⁵ This, for Heidegger, is the “pure forming of unification.”²⁶ What is being formed then, is imaginary, but “not necessarily an ontic appearance.”²⁷ It is a formed unity that is presented as being, and that means for Heidegger to be brought before cognition, i.e. pre-sented.

Heidegger thus bypasses the void point of the thing that thinks. Instead he delineates an originary forming form, an originary corpus of thought, that is neither simply given nor absent, but rather it pre-sents itself in its very passivity. But by being passive – letting something stand in opposition to it – it at the same time actively forms, builds, unifies. It is very clear that the Heideggerian reading tries to deprive Kant of the Cartesian, methodological *I think* and to inscribe the *I think* into a movement of becoming: *I am as a thinking being*. Thought, as a becoming, is finite. Not only because it refers to something in opposition to it, but also because it finds its end in the thing. Thought cannot overcome that which stands in opposition to it. But there is a precise change in the Kantian structure by way of Heidegger’s reading: The possibility of the transcendental apparatus has itself become a becoming. The question about the thing that thinks or the possibility of the transcendental as such loses its

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²² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, in: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 3: *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1991, p. 83.

²⁵ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 100.

justification. More than ever, change is a pseudo-problem, because all there is, is change. The beginning is only dubious if we consider being to be dubious, as cognition starts as turning-toward something being. And the unity? The unity is such that it “allows what is to be unified to spring forth.”²⁸ The unity is the originary act that allows difference to be. It is the ground on which difference originally can be. The unity is no longer the void point of the structure, but has now been turned into a moment of a passive becoming, actually a moment of being, grounding and dirempting. This alignment is not a simple equation, but takes place as a manoeuvre of crossing: The subjectivity of the I reacts to its outside, the object, in such a manner that it proves to be the reacting action that being is. This can be seen at the point at which Heidegger ascribes a ‘resistance’ to the subject that in the end is the resistance of the finitude of being itself: “In order to present the meaning of objectness, Kant appeals to what is contrary, what shows a peculiar character of resistance. But in fact, Kant does not think of an ontic resistance that emanates from a definite, extant object. Rather this resistance has to do with an *a priori* resistance, with a resistance which is in the subject – a resistance *which the subject gives to itself*.”²⁹ The imaginary as a void point is exchanged for a seeming resistance that actually is being. And the unity is no longer para-transcendental, but ontological. The question of change is solved – and the Kantian imaginary function of the I is transferred into a steady process, thereby losing any moment of its originary uncertainty.

4. Adorno’s Kant without Kant

But with the removal of the void point, the actual moment of resistance might become removed as well. And it might be that this originary void entails more than a certain ambiguity, namely the presence of something else in the I, an originary barring of its identity. One reading of Kant in which this point of an originary plural in the transcendental I is elaborated are Adorno’s lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In fact, it is interesting to see a certain proximity to the Heideggerian stance, even if the official results clearly differ. Reading Adorno’s lectures on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, one first notices a surprising similarity to Heidegger’s account in the emphasis on the question of ontology.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 250.

For Adorno, Kant's project aims at a "salvaging, and the salvaging of *ontology* in quite a specific sense."³⁰ One could even say that Adorno then understands ontology in quite a Heideggerian sense, as, for Adorno, ontology in Kant is only conceived as being in relation to existing being: "This means, then, that the ontological difference has the meaning that $\tau\alpha\ \omicron\nu\tau\alpha$ are indeed constituted through the $\omicron\nu$, through pure existence, but that conversely, pure existence only acquires truth in so far as it relates to $\tau\alpha\ \omicron\nu\tau\alpha$."³¹

Now, against Heidegger, Adorno finds "dialectical thought"³² already inscribed in this constellation, even though not yet made explicit. This is a methodological difference in their readings of Kant: While Heidegger wants to compensate for a flaw in Kant's construction, Adorno seeks to make an inner ambiguity productive. But both intend to give Kant's philosophy a turn that inscribes this philosophy into the present. And both also do present what they intend to minimise: Up to a certain point, Heidegger involuntarily underlines the necessity of the inner ruptures in the Kantian edifice, and Adorno underrates the productivity of ambiguity that is already taking place in Kant.

Following on this ontological-ontic constellation, Adorno then unfolds the parallel between a twofold notion of the subject and the corresponding twofold notion of the object. The notion of the subject is in the first instance the transcendental *I think*. But for Adorno this *I think* entails that an empirical subject is necessarily presupposed, although this is, strictly from the point of view of the Kantian structure, impossible. The fissured notion of the subject is answered by a fissured notion of the object. There is, on the one hand, the thing in-itself, which "means roughly: the entirely unknown and indefinite cause of phenomena."³³ But then there is also a second notion of the thing, "which we may call an immanent concept. According to this, a thing is nothing other than the laws that underlie the individual phenomena, the individual data of my consciousness."³⁴ But, based on this inherent fissure, both the subject as well as the object are a unity. And both unities correspond: The unity of the subject constitutes

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Stanford, CA: Stanford California Press, 2001, p. 85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the unity of the object, but the unity of the subject is also conceived in correspondence to the unity of the object. On the objective side, Kant thus doubles the world: into the sphere of phenomena and the sphere of the unknown. Adorno describes this as the process of alienation from the absolute that leads to the imperative according to which the “metaphysical homeless (...) must confine his activity to what he knows and what lies within his competence; he must seek the guarantee of an Absolute, the warranty of authentic truth, not as an objectivity external and alien to himself, but within himself.”³⁵ But the phenomenon, on the other hand, is subject to changes and deceptions, and to ensure the chain of identity, Kant brings in the category of causality. “For causality enables him to require that in order for something that conforms to laws to be subject to change, it must itself be subjected to a *law* of change.”³⁶

Subsequently, Adorno tackles the problem of *constituens* and *constitutum* in Kant as the main problem arising from this structure. Kant wants to not only provide a theory of knowledge, but to also give an explanation of the “origin of knowledge.”³⁷ He therefore needs to take a step away from purely formal logic and to establish a difference in the transcendental logic that also deals with the content of logical forms. A purely logical unity, Adorno continues, could never attain that spontaneity that Kant ascribes to thought. And this is why, for Adorno, in the pure *I think* there needs to be more implied than a purely logical point of unity. “It is possible to subsume something under such an entity, but an entity qua entity creates nothing, has no function and brings nothing about. But this element of bringing something about, of activity, is contained phenomenologically in the ‘I think’ that accompanies all my representations’. And if I did not possess the consciousness of such an ‘I do’, then there would be no such thing as an ‘I think’ that accompanies all my representations.”³⁸ This reads quite plainly as a provocation to the Kantian senses: Not only does Adorno *expressis verbis* inscribe something ‘phenomenological’ into the transcendental *I think*, but even more strongly, he directly short-circuits the *I think* with an ‘I do’, and finally even declares it to be conscious. It is, from a certain point of view, the complete deletion of the transcendental. But even if Adorno then later concludes “that the *constituens* stands in need of an individual subject as the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

precondition of its existence, and thus of a *constitutum*,”³⁹ Adorno still wants to retain the contradiction between the transcendental and the phenomenal. He wants to retain it in such a manner that not one side can be reduced to the other, and that therefore there cannot be any “absolute *first* principle.”⁴⁰ This precaution is embedded in a political stance, as for Adorno it is this safety measure that prevents “an ontology of Being, both in its idealist version of the sort that thrives here in West Germany, and also the crudely materialist ontology to which dialectics have regressed in the East.”⁴¹ Thus both of the competitors bury the contradiction, and with this very contradiction they bury the possibility of freedom.⁴² Adorno thus takes the *I think* as a figure of existence, and transfers the originary contradiction into a contradiction of existence. In a certain understanding, Adorno could be said to spell out the consequences of Heidegger’s account: The *I think* has a real corpus and it is also real as an existing resistance in the world.

The individual I inscribed in the transcendental is for Adorno a contingent I, and therewith inherently plural. The plurality of the I is thus doubled: Not only is there an immanent contradiction between the I as *constituens* and the I as *constitutum*, but also the I as *constitutum* is inherently multiple. Adorno insists that in the criterion of universality that links the *constituens* to the *constitutum*, against Kant’s own will, something else is inscribed: Something “very close to the concept consensus,”⁴³ namely the imperative that all human beings have to think in this manner. For Adorno the reason for this is that universality can only be universal if it includes the demand that everyone has to think in the same way. But at the same time, it is the awareness of the possibility to form the world: The inscription of the multiplicity of empirical individuals is necessary also to ground Adorno’s general judgment of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to be both an emancipatory moment of the rising bourgeoisie, as well as an attempt at an apology regarding the given societal conditions. In this existing split, Adorno sees the ‘metaphysical homeless’ directed to find a refuge inside himself, as if the *I think* were a new metaphysical shelter. But this refuge is fully inscribed into the existing world, and ontology is here reduced to the intersec-

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³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159. Translation modified, J.V.

⁴² See e.g. *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

tion of the threads of being. While this might be the reductive side of Adorno's account, there is also an extension of the Kantian thought that Adorno's reading allows for. And this is the inscription of (Freudian) psychoanalysis into the transcendental I. Although clearly, for Adorno, "Kant's intentions are hostile to psychology,"⁴⁴ Adorno has paved the way to read the transcendental I in a psychoanalytical/psychological understanding. First of all negatively: There is a "theological legacy" to be found in Kant's construction of the self: "the soul must be sacrosanct; the soul must not be allowed to be involved in experience or contaminated by the contingent nature of experience."⁴⁵ This unity as a defence against the manifold is a "denial of the instinctual elements that are part of the subject and that constitute the genetic precondition of all knowledge."⁴⁶ But the "ego principle," Adorno continues, is of course in itself "a form of energy that has been diverted from the reservoir of drives in our possession in the interest of self-preservation."⁴⁷ It is in this moment that it can be seen that Adorno takes the *I think* in its inner vacuity to be only a stabilising defence mechanism against the multiple. And it is clear that this defence mechanism for Adorno presents the actual problem. Once it is overcome, the Kantian philosophy is inscribed into reality and its contradictions. But, on the other hand, within this reading of Adorno's, the moments of instability that occurred in the three problems that were problems not for, but in Kant, lose their ground. Change has become a question of existence, as has the point of beginning (there being no first principle, the beginning lies in the contradiction of existence), and the thing that thinks is referred to as an act consciously done. Thus, although Adorno injects psychoanalysis into the *I think*, he injects it only as a defence against the defence mechanism in Kant. The *I think* is not uniform because it already exists in a plural world, full of instincts and others. The problem is that in this reading Adorno excludes another radical split of the self: What if the contradictory existence in the world were itself contradicted by something not-from-this-world? The psychoanalysis inserted is only used as a means against the unification of the *I think*, but it is itself rejected at the point at which it might be used to split the new uniformity of the subject as fully existing in the world.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

While Heidegger tries to unfold the imaginary as new grounds of certainty for the *I think*, and presents a corpus of the *I think*, Adorno takes the *I think* to be always already embedded in the world and in its contradictions. The void point of the thinking thing is what they both try to avoid. Thus while the process of the imaginary loses in Heidegger its *processuality* as well as its *contradiction*, in Adorno it loses its *imaginary* precisely for being inscribed into the reality of existence, and thereby as well loses the moment of *contradiction*. Both interpretations seek to transport the Kantian universe in their present, and both have to act excessively in this intention, they have to violently intervene in Kantian philosophy, both meet at a certain suspension of contradiction. But it is also this excessiveness that rather brings about an inner excess in the Kantian philosophy itself, an excess that is left unsatisfied: an imaginary that, although it is an agent of the unity, is a moment of a radical destabilisation, because it is irreducible to the given world and irreducible to the corpus of being. It is here that a different plurality of the originary *I think* arises, which also opens for an inner plurality of the Kantian edifice.