

Kant, Fichte, and the Act of the I

This essay focuses on a question crucial to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and foundational to that of his disciple Johann Fichte, i.e., what can theoretical philosophy tell us about the existence and identity of the self? The I as the act of self-positing is the ground of Fichte's entire *Wissenschaftslehre* (best translated as "theory of scientific knowledge"), and the notion of self-consciousness presented therein seems to be motivated primarily by Kant's remarks on the transcendental unity of apperception in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, though clearly Fichte has in view the whole scope of Kant's treatment of human cognition of objects. In what follows I argue that Fichte's conception of the pure I is logically consistent with Kant's on three points: first, concerning the active nature of pure apperception; second, concerning the distinction between pure and empirical apperception; and third, concerning their skepticism of any positive conclusions about the noumenal content of the pure I. As to the relation of the pure I to its object, however, I argue that Kant affirms the conceptual priority of the former to the latter while Fichte denies it.

Kant's I

In the transcendental deduction, Kant distinguishes two varieties of apperception dissociable from one another in philosophical reflection, i.e. pure and empirical.¹ Each amounts to a kind of self, but Kant argues that conclusions applicable to one of these must not be uncritically applied to the other. In both editions of the first *Critique* Kant takes great care to identify exactly what sorts of claims philosophy may soundly make about the self on the basis of the fact that objects are cognized at all. What, then, are supposed to be the characteristics distinguishing the pure I from the empirical I? To

¹ Cf. A107.

according to a rule, concepts cannot arise and the imagination would have no cognitive function. Since such a regularity is in fact present in human cognition, concepts do

In the first edition of the first *Critique*, immediately after having demonstrated why the existence of any object must be grounded in transcendental apperception, Kant

would have every reason accept the quite modest claim that the mind *does in fact* cognize objects, and insofar as he accepts this, it follows for him that transcendental apperception actually exists and makes objects possible. Smith may mean that transcendental apperception is not a *sufficient* condition for the existence of objects, and indeed, Kant admits that the spontaneous element of cognition is accompanied by a receptive one.⁷

However, another possible meaning of Smith's statement invites closer inspection: in concluding that transcendental apperception makes possible the experience of objects, Kant would have been unwarranted in positing the existence (even conditionally) of *a* transcendental self identical to the transcendental apperception he had just described. One might read Smith's statement as a precaution: take care not to ascribe the status of *thinghood* to transcendental apperception. Read in this sense, Smith seems to be pointing to a mistake easily made in attempting to understand the nature of transcendental apperception. Kant describes transcendental apperception as the "I think" that "must be able to accompany all my representations."⁸ Richard Aquila notes that "while the 'I think' expresses empirical knowledge for Kant, the term 'I' itself remains a mere 'thought', as yet provided with no determinate reference."⁹ The transcendental I is provided with no determinate reference precisely because it is not a determinate *thing* at all. Aquila goes on to say that "it would be perfectly appropriate for Kant to say that . . . my use of the 'I' can at most express the existence of *some* intelligent being,"¹⁰ and here we must be cautious in our interpretation, for it might be clearer to say that the pure I should at most express the *action* of self-consciousness (i.e. its cognition of itself) and *not*

⁷ Cf. A 97.

⁸ B 131.

⁹ "Personal Identity and Kant's 'Refutation of Idealism'," *Kant Studien* 70 (1979), 148.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 149.

any sort of substance of the same. As Theodor Adorno notes, “When [Kant] says that the ‘I think’ accompanies all my representations, this contains something else, namely the

“act which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.”¹⁸ “I am” is, for Fichte, a *Tathandlung*: “I am” expresses the I’s act of *positing* itself. What is being posited in this act is nothing other than the existence of the pure I: Fichte claims that the I exists only insofar as the I posits itself as existing.¹⁹ Fichte’s account of the manner in which this act makes objective consciousness possible reflects the logical progression of Kant’s deduction of the c

approach:

the world of objects. “Every oppos

consciousness. Instead, he starts from the premise that any identity is as such always already distinguished from that to which it is *non*-identical, and insofar as this is the case, although the pure I is *logically* prior to the not-I in Fichte's presentation, he does not hold it to be conceptually prior.

The systematic upshot of this difference between the philosophies of Kant and Fichte is perhaps unclear: Kant did not present his philosophy of the interaction of the unity of consciousness and objects of experience in the systematized fashion of Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*; the first *Critique* is less a deduction of theses about the nature of the interaction of I and not-I than it is a propaedeutic to metaphysics and the warranted assertion of synthetic *a priori* propositions. Fichte operates on the supposition that Kant accomplished the idealist turn but simply did not organize his principles systematically. The apparent difference in their conclusions concerning the conceptual priority of the pure I seems relevant to Fichte's work at least: had Fichte admitted the conceptual priority of the I relative to the not-I, the course of the 1794 presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* might have been plotted radically differently, since Fichte's philosophy of interdetermination would not have featured so prominently if indeed it would have appeared at all.