

# Kant on Self-Awareness

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This paper has three main parts. First, I discuss Kant on self-awareness in terms of inner sense, why he failed to make this account coherent, and why he failed to give such an account. Second, I give two reasons why such an account is bound to be inadequate. In the last section, I discuss another attempt Kant was tempted to give in terms of transcendental self-awareness involving a nonsensory intuitive perception that helps solve some of his problems.

*Keywords:* Self-Awareness; Consciousness; Transcendental

## Introduction

This paper is organized into three main parts. First, I discuss Kant's account of the self and self-awareness in terms of inner sense, why he failed to make this account coherent, and why he thought he should give such an account of self-awareness. Second, two reasons for saying that such an empirical account is bound to be inadequate are sketched. In the second section of the paper, I discuss another account that Kant was tempted to give in terms of transcendental self-awareness, and outline a thicket of attendant problems. Third, I find in Kant a foreshadowing of an account of self-awareness in terms of a nonsensory intuitive perception of the self that helps solve some of his problems.

## Inner Sense

How the "I" that thinks can be distinct from the "I" that intuits itself... and yet, this being the same subject, can be identical with the latter; and how... I can say: "I as... thinking subject, know myself as an object that is thought, in so far as I am given to myself as something other or beyond that I know which is given to myself in intuition, and yet know myself, like other phenomena, only as I appear to myself, not as I am to understanding"—these are questions that raise great difficulties (B155) (Kant, 1933).

How great is the difficulty... which lies in the fact that consciousness of himself presents only the appearance of himself, and not the man in himself, and so although there is not a twofold "I", yet there is a twofold consciousness of this "I", ... consciousness of mere thought, then also that of inner perception (Kant, 1922: p. 193).

Within these passages Kant formulates a problem within his philosophy that he was never able to resolve to his own satisfaction. The problem concerns the nature of the self and self-awareness. Kant accepted the assumption made by Descartes and Hume that what I am is identifiable with what I can be aware of myself as being. I can be aware of myself as a subject that thinks, because I am aware of the activity of thinking

within me. But this awareness or consciousness of my thinking is not a sense experience, because sense experience involves perception and time. For Kant, there is a distinction between the thought processes of the empirical self that transpire within the bounds of time and inner sense and the atemporal, categorical "thought" of the transcendental subject. The act of thinking is itself atemporal and unperceivable (Kant, 1902). Thinking cannot be temporal and empirical, because our awareness of time presupposes something outside of time. We can think of our sense experience as temporal only if time itself can be thought of as give, i.e., time is a unified intuition. Let us try to understand the difficulty Kant saw here.

I am aware of the "I" as thinking subject, only as a precondition for any experience, including experience of myself. So this "I" or thinking subject, as an activity of unifying and combining what is given to me in one time order, is both what I am and a precondition for what I can experience myself as being. I can experience my internal states, moments of pleasure and pain, my desires and feelings, and all that which comprises my empirical self, only because I am so constituted that I can conjoin my sensations into perceptions of objects in space and time. So I can have experience and knowledge of myself, taken as object, only if I, as subject, am of such a nature as to make knowledge of myself possible.

The problem can be put something like this: How can there be one and the same self, if we distinguish the I which thinks (apperception) from the I which is intuited (inner sense)? If I am a thinking subject, how can I know myself in intuition? And how can such knowledge be knowledge of myself, if it is knowledge of myself as I appear to myself in intuition, and not as I am in myself?

The problem was a real one, and Kant's awareness of it was partially dimmed by his dismissal of it. He says that it is no more a difficulty than the questions of how I can be an object to myself at all. It can be shown that I know myself only as I appear to myself in intuition, by reminding ourselves that space is a pure form of appearances to outer sense, and by asserting that time and space are on equal footing. Just as we know objects in

space only so far as we are externally affected, we can know ourselves through inner sense only insofar as we are internally affected by ourselves (Kant, 1933: p. B156).

His problem is still not solved, for he merely reaffirms that we must be inwardly affected by a noumenal reality in order to know ourselves as an object at all. We still have an unbridged gap between the transcendental and empirical aspects of the self. We can bring this duality into sharper relief by borrowing a distinction made by G. H. Mead between the I and the me. The I is a pure spontaneity, a thinking activity, or performance. The me is myself taken as object, the result of the performance, what I can know and say about myself. Presumably, a coherent account of the self and self-awareness would show that the I and the me are two aspects of the same subject. Kant cannot say this because the dual aspects of the I and the me are accompanied by two kinds of self-awareness that are not consistent. I am aware of the fact that I am, of the transcendental "I" through the unity of self-consciousness, but I can know myself, the me, only as I am inwardly affected by the I in inner sense. So I am systematically precluded from ever being able to tell whether the I and the me are identical. Any common root of my split self is inaccessible to me, and I can never understand the generation of this epistemological schizophrenia. For we don't even know whether the thinking "I" "exists independently of what we can conjecture to be the transcendental substratum of outer appearances" (Kant, 1933: p. A383).

Kant did not think this problem could be resolved, and Peter F. Strawson also said that the problem is insoluble, that empirical self-consciousness is confined to the subject of inner sense, and can never explain the identity of this subject with the supersensible subject, and that the only alternative is to remove the temporal limitation on appearances and allow for a transcendental self-consciousness, but this is unintelligible. However, this move is too drastic, and is not the sole alternative. Transcendental self-awareness can occur only when the conditions for the empirical self-awareness are satisfied, and the appearances are strung out in a temporal order. This is the only alternative Kant allows for in order to make good the identity of the I and the me (Strawson, 1966: p. 209).

Kant believed we are one self that appears in two ways: as a spontaneous, knowing subject, and as a receptive, known object. The self-awareness that I am is a completely empty representation, of which we cannot even have the concept without being inwardly affected by inner sense. We can only "revolve in a perpetual circle" around ourselves, as we actually are, "since any judgment upon it has already made use of it as representation" (Kant, 1933: p. B404). Kant reminds us again and again of the circularity of his account of the self and self-awareness:

"I cannot know as an object that which I must presuppose in order to know any object" (Kant, 1933: p. A402). Elsewhere he says,

The subject of the categories cannot by thinking the categories acquire a concept of itself as an object of the categories. For in order to think them, its pure self-consciousness, which is what is to be explained, must itself be presupposed. Similarly, the subject, in which the representation of time has its original ground, cannot thereby determine its own existence in time. And if this latter is impossible, the former, as a determination of the self (as a thinking thing in general) by means of the categories, is equally so (Kant, 1933: p. B422).

Kant was willing to leave us in this perpetual circle of never grasping what we are, but always moving around ourselves. We can never know what kind of being "the logical 'I' qua representation a priori is," that "it is like the 'substantial' which remains self over, when I leave away all the accidents which inhere to it, which, however cannot be all further known, because the accidents are precisely that by which I know its nature" (Kant, 1902: p. 270). This indicates that there is more going on here than empiricist doubts about a substratum, since we do not even know the accidents or qualities of the logical, formal aspect of the self. Kant is here referring to sensible qualities.

The pure spontaneity of our thinking self-activity can never be grasped as a being with any properties because we can never get hold of our thinking activity as an object. We are always using it, performing the act of combining the manifold of intuition, and we can never determine its ontological status just because of this.

Kant's account of the self and self-awareness involves a distinction between the I of apperception (intellectual self-awareness) and the me of inner sense (empirical self-awareness). One finds himself in inner sense only as he appears to himself. Empirical self-awareness is the consciousness of ones temporally ordered states of mind, and he insists: "Consciousness if self according to the determinations of our state of inner perception is merely empirical, and always changing. No fixed and abiding self can be present itself in this flux of inner appearances" (Kant, 1933: p. A107). The problem of giving an account of the identity of the I and the me would still not be solved if the determinations of inner sense were not always changing, if some were relatively invariant; they would still be states of ourselves. Even if the category of substance were applicable to the empirical self I would be able to think of myself as permanent in time only by presupposing the I which thinks. The unchanging me, of phenomenal substance, would have to be thought through the unschematized category of substance, and this would presuppose the transcendental unity of apperception for the inner perception of a persisting phenomenal object to be a recognition of myself. Any phenomenal substance within my inner self, the self of inner sense, would be an unchangeable something within myself, and thus could not be the self or subject of consciousness itself.

Part of Kant's difficulty is that he never fully rejected what Sydney Shoemaker has described as the perceptual model of self-awareness. Self-awareness could be thought of on the model of sense perception. In this model we are aware of ourselves as we are in a certain state in the same way we can be aware of a physical object by perceiving its attributes. Just as I see a thing which is blue when I see the blueness of that thing, I can also see myself when I perceive some inner state of myself. Hume maintained that we are aware of neither an external physical substance in space, nor a self that has conscious states, using this model for self-awareness. Kant granted him all this, and by accepting this perceptual model of empirical self-awareness, Kant tried to give an account of self-awareness he recognized as being circular. For to identify as self as myself by its having any perceived attributes, I would have to know already that I perceive these attributes by inner sense, and this higher-order self-awareness, being the condition for my identification of the perceived self as myself, could not itself be conditioned by that identification. Empirical self-awareness requires a prior self-awareness of another kind in order for me to

be able to recognize what is given to me through inner perception as mine. The problem in Hume's words is that "self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several perceptions and ideas are supposed to have a reference" (Hume, 251).

Kant believed that this single something, to which all mental contents are referred, must be found outside of sense experience. Our awareness of it can no longer be explained within the model of perceptual awareness itself. In the final analysis, Kant rejects inner perception as an adequate account of the self and self-awareness, but he still accepts the framework for marking off the limits of self-knowledge.

At this point I shall argue that no account of the nature of the self and self-awareness can be given, independently of the Kantian system, in terms of what is empirically accessible exclusively to the subject of experience. Although the history of such attempts has been a long one, I would like to suggest that the Kantian thesis of the transcendental ego and the ultimacy of the forms of time and space in which the presentations of identifiable objects are unified, provides good reasons why this cannot be done. I shall present these reasons in terms of (1) awareness of any single object of experience, and (2) awareness of the spatial or temporal relations between objects of experience.

Consider the statement "I see a tree." This statement is true just in case there is a tree there, and I am looking at it, paying attention, and so on. I cannot come to realize that it is I who am seeing the tree, because I can never discover that there is a tree in my visual field and that I am not perceiving it. The tree cannot be given in my experience at all unless it is given as my perception. I cannot perceive the tree, and perceive myself, and see that it is I who am in the relation of perceiving with the tree. For, if I could do that, then it would have to be possible for me to perceive myself, and the tree, and see as a fact about myself, that I am not perceiving the tree. Clearly this is not possible because the relation of perceiving or acquaintance, as Kant saw, is not an empirical, contingent relation. For the self and the object of experience are co-determinative; each is a necessary condition for the existence of the other. Thus it is self-contradictory to suppose that I could perceive a tree, and realize, as a fact about this perceptual relation, that it is not me perceiving the tree. But this should be possible if we are to account for self-awareness solely in terms of what is exclusively empirically accessible to myself.

Although this line of thought has been used by Shoemaker, I think it is a variation on the Kantian theme expressed by saying that the "I think" must be able to accompany all of my representations, and cannot itself be accompanied by any further representation (Kant, 1933: p. B132). In Kant the very distinction between inner and outer perception presupposes the distinction between the unity of consciousness and the object of knowledge. The perception of something as external to myself, as not me, logically implies an awareness of myself, even if only in a purely negative sense. And the awareness of something as inside me, or part of myself, implies there is something outside, and not in me, from which the current object of knowledge (my mental state) is to be distinguished. But this logical polarity between what is perceived as outside and what is perceived as inside myself, is paralleled by, and made possible by, the more basic polarity between the unity of consciousness and the object of knowledge. The difference between inner and outer, internal and external, what is part of me, and what is

not me, presupposes a knowing self or subject which can be conscious of this difference. And whether an object of perception be external of my inner goings on, it is never open to question whether this is an object of knowledge for myself or someone else. Part of what it is for the unity of consciousness to be transcendental, basic, original, and unchangeable is that its relation to an object of experience is necessary, and can never itself be empirically given. In addition, it means that our intellectual self-awareness is immediately given, and not the result of reflection or introspection.

Consider the statement "S is aware that something A is related to something B." where this relation is either spatial or temporal. This statement is clearly not equivalent to "S knows something A and something B." or to the statement "The existence of A is related to the existence of B." According to the first statement, it is the fact of being related that is known, and this is left out by the other statements. The awareness involves awareness of a relation and of the fact that A and B are the relata.

Some traditional ways of putting what is applied in the above statement is that as awareness of a relation (e.g., succession) is not the same as a relation of awarenesses (succession of awarenesses). If A occurred by itself, ceased, and then B occurred, there would not be an awareness of A being related to B. For there to be this relation, there must be a conscious awareness of A, B, and the relation between them. A conscious awareness implies not only that objects are so ordered, but a subject which is not itself located within the ordered relata. In the case of temporal relations, if S knows that B is followed by A, S himself cannot be said to precede or follow either of them. The same considerations apply to space, mental states, properties of an object, and whatever else can be known relationally.

The above argument is another way of interpreting what is involved in the assertion that the "I think" must be able to accompany all of my representations. A radical empiricist might counter this argument with the following principle: Given a set of many elements each related to a special one, we can do away with the one to which all other elements are created by speaking simply of the set connected by certain relationships among them. Such an empiricist then owes us an explanation of how any given element, or subset, can be consciously aware of the order and arrangements among many of the elements of the set, including itself, without supposing that the members of the set are persons. The difficulty of giving a coherent picture along these lines testifies to the Kantian insight of the ultimacy of the "I think". For the "I think" cannot be related to the elements of experience the way they are related to each other, and cannot be derived from anything more basic.

### Transcendental Self-Awareness

If these two reasons militate against an account of self-awareness and the self in terms of what is empirically accessible exclusively to the subject of experiences, then Kant was correct on insisting on a nonsensuous awareness of the self. Our awareness of the unity of the self is an awareness of "that unity of consciousness which precedes all data of intuition, and by relation to which representation of objects is alone possible" (Kant, 1933: p. A107). A coherent account of the self in these terms would show that the I as a thinking subject is the same as the me, or the awareness I have of myself, independently of the self-knowledge gained through inner sense. That this approach

was open to Kant can be seen from what has already been said. The requirements for the possibility of self-awareness, as well as awareness of my own existence, including awareness of my own existence, includes awareness of both what the mind does (its thinking) and what it suffers or undergoes (its states). The empirically accessible self, a legitimate object of the study of psychology, is a necessary condition for any self-awareness. Yet we can abstract from this to provide some account of the self in terms of transcendental self-consciousness of our original apperception. It will be useful to collate some of the things Kant says about the transcendental self, and my awareness of it, in various places.

He describes our awareness of it as: "Consciousness of mere thought (or thinking)" (Kant, 1902, Vol. 7: p. 193).

It is an intellectual self-consciousness which is neither an intuition, a concept, nor the determination of any object:

"An act of the understanding of the determining subject" (Kant, 1902, Vol. 7).

"A simple representation of the subject of judgment in general, of which one knows everything, when one simply thinks it" (Kant, 1902: p. 193).

"Consciousness of pure spontaneity (the concept of freedom)" (Kant, 1902: p. 193).

"Transcendental consciousness" (Kant, 1902: p. 18).

"Consciousness of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am" (Kant, 1933: p. B157).

It is a representation that is a thinking activity not an intuition: "A simple and completely empty representation that is not a concept, but a bare consciousness that accompanies all concepts" (Kant, 1933: p. B404).

He describes the transcendental unity of apperception as being: "The 'I think' that accompanies all my representations, but cannot itself be accompanied by any further representation" (Kant, 1933: p. B132).

It is the condition for all a priori knowledge:

"Pure original unchangeable consciousness" (Kant, 1933: p. A107).

"An objective unity, i.e., the source of unity of objects" (Kant, 1933: p. B139).

"A transcendental subject of thoughts = x." (Kant, 1933: p. B404).

"A power of combination or synthesis" (Kant, 1933: pp. B153, B158).

"A source of unity and combination" (Kant, 1933: p. B154).

"A logically simple and identical subject" (Kant, 1933: pp. A363, B407).

One thing that can be gleaned from these various comments is that self-consciousness is indistinguishable from apperception. (The power or faculty of apperception can be said to be manifested in the act of self-awareness; the act is basic). The activity of pure apperception is both an activity of thinking and a consciousness of thinking. Thus all thinking has some degree of self-awareness, even if we do not encounter the thinking subject (thinker) as an object. However, self-awareness of our own thinking is not an introspective awareness or a separate act. So in what sense do I have self-awareness?

If self-awareness of my thinking is not a separate act of awareness, it must be part of the performance of the activity of thinking; it is implicit in the act of thought. For Kant, I am aware of both the unity and activity of my thinking as I perform it. My awareness of my thinking is not the same as the activity of combination, but in thinking I am implicitly aware of my

thinking. The starting point is always an immediate awareness of the unity of the act of apperception, when the unity is presumably the result of the activity of combination. It would seem more plausible to say that self-awareness is awareness of the unity of that "unity of apperception" which is an outcome of the activity of thinking, and that we are aware of both the activity and the product. It was open to Kant to do this by appealing to a nonsensory intuitive perception of oneself, as I will point out later.

A further complication is introduced in the above descriptions. The I is an empty representation, and not a concept; Kant adds that we have no concept of it. It is the source of all our concepts, so our self-awareness of it is nonconceptual. The difficulty of trying to fathom how I can be aware if myself and have no concept of myself is symptomatic of deeper troubles. Since my self-awareness and my thinking are not the same, my self-awareness must be produced by my thought. Thus there must be a mental activity in order to produce any self-awareness. The elusive I, or that which thinks, is known only by its product. But does it make any sense to say that I can produce my self-awareness? And if it does make sense, how can this awareness be awareness of myself, if I produce it?

It seems we are logically condemned to a situation of penultimate self-awareness. I am always aware of what I just did, but never of the I that thinks. The perpetual circle carries over to atemporal self-awareness. The only way out seems to be an act of awareness of myself, that does not presuppose myself, and this subjectless act would be an awareness of the I as the me. But then I would not be aware of myself.

Kant does want to say that we are somehow aware of the I that thinks. We need not be reflectively aware of the "I think" in making judgments, but it is presupposed by what we are immediately aware of. For to know any object we must be able to distinguish it from the self and its states. But a brief inspection of Kant's descriptions of our awareness of the I makes it clear that he doesn't really give an account of self-awareness of ourselves as thinking beings. To say that the I is a representation says no more than to point out that it is an element of the mind. To say our self-awareness is transcendental, or consciousness of thinking, adds nothing to what we already know. Denying that such self-awareness is conceptual doesn't make the account any clearer. It may seem that Kant really has no further account of self-awareness to give, in addition to empirical self-awareness. But it will be a claim of this paper that Kant has a further account to give.

Kant is not entirely consistent in denying that we know, or have any concept of, the I. He wants to say that in some sense we do know that it is the same understanding or apperception that conceptualizes all the intuitions belonging to one self-consciousness, and it must be possible for this identity to be known to the subject that has these experiences. Although he is forever denying that we know anything about the nature of the I, we do know that "the numerical unity of this apperception... is the ground of all concept" (Kant, 1933: p. A107). To dismiss this kind of knowing as transcendental knowledge won't help us resolve the difficulty, for an analysis of the conditions for knowledge is not something known by self-awareness. It is knowledge of the form of knowing, and not of the properties of our mental operations.

There is evidence that Kant does want to extend self-knowledge to the spontaneous thinking subject. In one place Kant says,

Man, who knows all the rest of nature solely through his senses, knows himself through pure apperception: and this, indeed, in acts and inner determinations which he cannot regard as impressions of the senses. He is thus to himself, on the one hand phenomenon, and on the other hand, in respect of certain faculties of the action of which cannot be ascribed to a receptivity of sensibility, a purely intelligible object. We entitle these latter faculties understanding and reason (Kant, 1933: pp. A546,B547).

This clearly suggests that in pure apperception we have a supersensible, transcendental awareness of the I. In another place Kant says "I exist as an intelligence which is conscious solely of its power of combination" (Kant, 1933: p. B158). This could be translated as "I exist as an entity that knows about itself by its performance of an activity of combination." It is time to get to another kind of self-awareness that Kant foreshadows.

### Self Perception as a Nonsensory Perceptual Intuition

By suggesting that we might have a nonsensuous awareness of the transcendental self as a precondition for knowledge of the empirical self, Kant foreshadows, and makes room for, a solution to his problem in terms of a nonsensory intuitive perception of the self. Let me explain what I mean by a nonsensory perception. The concept of perception is much wider than that of sense perception. There is the possibility of a nonsensory perception of something. If I come to a sudden realization that I should help a blind person to cross the street I may have a nonsensory awareness in that situation as a sort of intuitive awareness or perception. It is a perception because something prompts me or is presented to me mentally although not through any of the five sense modalities. Such nonsensory perceptions are quite common.

I have argued elsewhere that we can enjoy self-knowledge of the self or subject of experience, and of a nonsensory intuitive sort that counts as a perception. It is a perception because the

self is given to me, prompts me, is a stimulus, or something that presents itself to me. It is given to me, rather than created by me (Smythe, 2010).

I believe that this will help with Kant's remarks, and that Kant presaged this solution by opening the way for a nonsensuous knowledge of the thinking self. The I which thinks (apperception) is known in a different way as the I of sensory intuition (inner sense). I know the effect of the noumenal self, pure spontaneity, or the transcendental "I" by virtue of having a nonsensory intuitive perception of it. This is not awareness of oneself as substance, but it is an awareness of something that unifies and synthesizes our sensory perceptions or empirical manifold. It is more than a bundle or series of perceptions. We have a nonsensory intuitive perception of a thinking activity. It is a reflexive self-consciousness that goes beyond, and is a condition for, the flux of inner appearances. I think that this was open for Kant, and that his remarks paved the way for it. That is what Kant meant by "consciousness that I am."

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