

Comments on Dennis Schulting: *Kant's Radical Subjectivism*

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss four ways in which Schulting's phenomenalist interpretation of Kant faces the challenge of accounting for the possibility of objective cognition. First, I ask whether objective cognition requires the understanding to be a faculty of absolute, not merely relative spontaneity. Second, is objectivity compatible with thinking of the transcendental 'I' as an indexical? Third, does objectivity require that the objects have being independently of the understanding? Finally, is it a threat to objectivity if objects can be given to me in sensibility without standing under the categories?

Keywords: objectivity, transcendental idealism, phenomenism

One of the challenges faced by any phenomenalist interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is to demonstrate how his emphasis on the role that the subject plays in making cognition possible is compatible with the *objectivity* and *truth* of cognition. Dennis Schulting has attempted to meet this challenge in *Kant's Radical Subjectivism* both through a close reading of the transcendental deduction and through a discussion of numerous contributions from the contemporary secondary literature. In this article, I would like to raise a few questions about Schulting's subjectivist approach, and suggest that it does not go far enough in grounding the objectivity of cognition.

Schulting's book is a welcome challenge to realist, metaphysical readings of the first *Critique* that neglect the role of self-consciousness and of the subject in Kant's project of showing how synthetic *a priori* cognition is possible. Realist readings cannot explain the *a priori* connection between subject and object, since they assume that we cannot learn about the being of the object through a reflection on ourselves (see p. 15).

The object's being is instead, on realist approaches, entirely independent of the subject's access to it in cognition. By contrast, Schulting's 'radical subjectivist' reading of transcendental idealism makes the subject's activity in synthesizing a manifold of sensibility *constitutive* of the object; so through *a priori* reflection on ourselves, we are able to discern the fundamental categorial structure of the objects of cognition. The objects have being only in their relation to our cognition of them; they are constitutively the objects *of* our cognitive capacities, and hence cannot be understood apart from the latter. This acknowledgement of Kant's 'Copernican' turn, which has been downplayed in recent metaphysical readings of Kant, has made an impressive comeback with Schulting's book.

Schulting of course aims to distinguish Kant's 'critical' subjectivism from a 'bad' subjectivist or bad phenomenalist reading according to which what is true is merely true 'for us', from 'our perspective'. His strategy for avoiding this bad form of subjectivism is to show how our epistemic agency is *exhaustively* constitutive of objectivity, leaving no room for *other* perspectives from which the objects might appear differently (pp. 16–17). The categories are thus conditions not merely of my epistemic access to the objects, but of the objects themselves: they are 'not merely something I myself need in order to cognize an object' (B138).¹

What allows us to say that our categorial determinations of objects correspond to the way the objects really are, rather than merely how they appear to us? In other words, what gives Kant an entitlement to speak of *knowledge*, which implies a grasp of objectivity in an absolute (and not merely relative) sense? What licenses his rejection of a bad form of subjectivism that would give us not knowledge, but mere appearance, or that would reduce objectivity to 'objectivity for us', *relative* to our perspective? How would Kant respond to the Hegelian charge that the very idea of 'knowledge of appearances' is a contradiction in terms?

Schulting's reading of Kant can lead us to revisit questions of this sort from several angles. In the following, I will address four different ways in which his reading of Kantian subjectivity threatens to make phenomenalism look incompatible with the objectivity of knowledge. (1) Schulting reads the spontaneity involved in cognition as a 'relative' not 'absolute' spontaneity, raising questions about whether Kant can rule out intellects with different conceptual schemes, or different categories. (2) Schulting treats the 'I' as an indexical, which makes it hard to see how the *subjective* conditions under which I apperceive all my representations as mine can also be *objective* conditions of thought. (3) Schulting maintains that

appearances depend for their being on our subjectivity, while things in themselves do not, suggesting that there is a 'reality' beyond the limits of our understanding. If the understanding has 'limits' in this sense, it is hard to see how it can be a capacity for *knowledge*. (4) Schulting's version of non-conceptualism suggests that objects might be given to me in sensibility without standing under the categories, implying that the categories are subjective impositions on independently given intuitions.

1

Robert Pippin and Henry Allison have defended the thesis that the spontaneity involved in theoretical cognition is an 'absolute spontaneity', not a 'relative spontaneity' (*spontaneitas secundum quid*). Kant maintains that the latter kind of spontaneity is like the spontaneity of a turnspit, whose principle (or source) of motion is internal to it, but has itself been caused by something external (an external principle setting it in motion):

Spontaneity <*spontaneitas*> is either absolute or without qualification <*absoluta vel simpliciter talis*>, or qualified in some respect <*secundum quid talis*>. – Spontaneity in some respect <*spontaneitas secundum quid*> is when something acts spontaneously under a condition. So, e.g., a body which is shot off moves spontaneously, but in some respect <*secundum quid*>. This spontaneity <*spontaneitas*> is also called automatic spontaneity <*spontaneitas automatica*>, namely when a machine moves itself according to an inner principle, e.g., a watch, a turnspit. But the spontaneity is not without qualification <*simpliciter talis*> because here the inner principle <*principium*> was determined by an external principle <*principium externum*>. The internal principle <*principium internum*> with the watch is the spring, with the turnspit the weight, but the external principle <*principium externum*> is the artist who determines the internal principle <*principium internum*>. (Met-LI, 28: 267)

Pippin and Allison have argued that, although theoretical cognition requires that objects are given in intuition, the act of taking them to be thus-and-so cannot be given, but is instead an activity that has its source entirely in ourselves and has no external cause. Therefore, they conclude, the spontaneity of the understanding is an absolute spontaneity. According to Schulting, this reading brings Kant into perilous proximity with his German idealist successors, insofar as they interpret epistemic agency as a kind of freedom. Only practical freedom in a moral context, Schulting argues, can be spontaneous in the 'absolute' sense. Spontaneity

in theoretical cognition, by contrast, is responsive to the objects given to it in sensibility, and is thus a relative spontaneity, even though this does not mean that spontaneity is ‘part of the antecedent causal order’ (p. 126).

I think Schulting here overlooks the key issue in this debate, which concerns the source of the *principle* of the understanding’s activity, not just of its *exercises*; this comes out in Kant’s discussion of relative and absolute spontaneity in the passage above. Although Kant already, at the beginning of the first *Critique*, indicates that the understanding is *awakened* into activity through the deliverances of sensibility, this does not mean that the laws or principles of its proper exercise have an external source. If the objects were a source of the laws to which we are subject, what could rule out other intellects being subject to different laws? That is, why should it not be possible that the objects appearing to other intellects have different forms? Alternative principles of the understanding can only be excluded if they do not have an external source, and hence only if we take the spontaneity of the understanding to be absolute.

2

The second respect in which Schulting’s reading of Kant appears to be too subjectivist concerns its understanding of transcendental apperception. Schulting I think rightly emphasizes that, for Kant, there is no gap between the self-consciousness in judging and the consciousness of the object of judgement, since consciousness of the object just is the consciousness of an act of synthesis performed by the subject. But if the ‘I’ that I am conscious of is an indexical, as Schulting suggests, the object of judgement must likewise be indexed to me, as the object of *my* experience (p. 163). To put this point differently, notice that the no-gap claim can be interpreted as follows: the judgement ‘The table is brown’ has the same content as the judgement ‘I think “the table is brown”’. The ‘I think’ does not add anything to the original judgement, but merely expresses what is already involved in its relation to an object (as expressed by the copula). But if the ‘I’ here is an indexical, this means that the relation to the object in judgement is inseparable from relations to myself, as a particular individual distinct from others, i.e. as a subject of sensory experience. Thus the object must be understood as an ‘object for me’.

We get a different result if transcendental ‘I-thoughts’ are *not* a special sub-class of thoughts, alongside thoughts about objects like tables. First-personal *transcendental* thoughts do not, that is, introduce a new kind of indexical (an essential indexical, say) or a new type of Fregean sense (*de se* sense), that have special features, such as immunity to error

through misidentification. Instead, transcendental I-thoughts articulate the logical form of any judgement, and thus exhibit the features of *any* judgement whatsoever. This would allow us to identify the object-consciousness expressed by 'The table is brown' with the self-consciousness of 'I think "The table is brown"' without having to think of the table as an object only for my phenomenal consciousness. Only in this way will we avoid the pernicious consequences of 'bad' subjectivism while retaining the identity of subject and object in cognition.

I think that careful attention to Kant's distinction between transcendental and empirical apperception can also shed light on his distinction between 'transcendental truth' and 'empirical truth'. Schulting argues that all empirical judgements are transcendently true, even when they are empirically false. That is, they all involve a true application of the categories to objects of experience. According to Schulting, such applications of the categories are 'immune to error through misapplication' (p. 153). Presumably, the thought here is that transcendental objects are not given to me empirically, through the senses, but instead are somehow the products of *a priori* spontaneous syntheses of a manifold. And I cannot fail to grasp my own acts of synthesis. Since consciousness of these syntheses is a (transcendental) self-consciousness, the claim boils down to saying that transcendental apperception is not subject to illusion or deception. If this is right, it is hard to know what to do with the countless self-deceptions of traditional and contemporary metaphysicians. What sort of errors do they commit, if they are not errors in the misapplication of categories such as 'substance' or 'cause' to things in themselves? And why is this not a kind of self-deception, due to a lack of criticism with regard to their own cognitive faculties? Moreover, why should at least some false empirical judgements not involve a misapplication of the categories? Suppose that the table is brown, but I falsely judge it to be green. This means that I falsely think that 'green' truly relates, as accident, to the substance that is the table. To suppose that this relation (between substance and accident) could exist without the empirical relata existing seems to be like supposing that a man could exist without the body of man. That is, transcendental truth would seem to be as inseparable from empirical truth as Aristotelian forms are from the matter in which they are actual. But this is a difficult issue, and one I cannot explore in any detail here.

3

Schulting raises some convincing objections against the realist assumption that objectivity requires the objects of cognition to have being

entirely independently of the subject. Yet he retains the idea that things in themselves have their being entirely independently of the subject, and that ‘we have no access’ to these things ‘because of the limitations of our discursivity’ (p. 373; see also p. 381). Kant’s idealism is due not to our subjective, human forms of sensibility, but instead ‘concerns the inherent limitation of our discursive thinking, of our very conceptuality’ (p. 374): ‘The thesis that our thought, in virtue of the principle of apperception or transcendental self-consciousness, is solely constitutive of the very conception of what an object is or what objectivity means, already entails idealism about objects’ (p. 372). However, if the understanding (faculty of concepts) were limited in the ways that Schulting suggests, Kant’s entire project of grounding the objectivity of cognition through *a priori* concepts of the understanding will fall to the ground. For our understanding will not, under this assumption, know the objects as they really are, but will only have access to the ways they seem to be. Even the mention of ‘epistemic access’ in this context raises alarms, since it suggests something like a ‘perspective’ or ‘route’ towards something independently given. Just as our senses only give us access to objects from a particular perspective, the understanding too would be bound to a perspective of a finite being in the world. We would have no capacity to transcend the perspective of a *being in the world* through a ‘view from nowhere’ or at the *limit of the world*. But if the ‘limits’ of our capacity for knowledge make the very idea of a non-perspectival, objective standpoint impossible, there would be no hope of showing how a *a priori* knowledge of objects is possible.

Kant himself acknowledges the unbounded character of the understanding by suggesting that its proper objects are *noumena* – objects of *nous*. Noumena are not more independent of the intellect than appearances; on the contrary, they are more dependent. For they are the objects of an infinite intellect that creates what it knows; thus even their *existence* depends on the intellect. By contrast, appearances exist *independently* of us, which is why they must be *given* to us in sensibility. Thus the more dependent the objects are on the intellect, the more *objective* and absolute cognition of them becomes. The less dependent they are on the intellect, the more we must rely on how objects happen to be given to us in sensibility. This means that we must rely on the ways they *appear* to us. The root of Kant’s idealism, his restriction of knowledge to appearances, is thus due not to the intellect, but to human sensibility – contrary to Schulting’s thesis that idealism is entailed by the ‘principle of apperception or transcendental self-consciousness’ as constitutive of the object (p. 372).

4

I will raise one final worry about Schulting's version of non-conceptualism in the context of a grounding of objectivity. Schulting argues that Kant's critical subjectivism leaves room for non-conceptual content that is 'not subject to the original principle of apperception' (p. 20). The 'mere apprehension' of a manifold does not 'involve *a priori* synthesis" (p. 234). This radical claim, which divorces apprehension not only from the categories, but also from apperception, rests on the assumption that transcendental synthesis and the categories cannot come apart. However, Kant argues that even the *a priori* forms of intuition (or what he calls 'formal intuitions' at B161n.) involve unity, and hence synthesis – although they precede all concepts: 'in the Aesthetic I ascribed this unity merely to sensibility, only in order to note that it precedes all concepts, thought 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' (B160–1n.). Insofar as the apprehension of a manifold is the apprehension of a manifold in space and time, it must at least involve the syntheses that constitute the unity of space and time themselves. In this way, it must relate to the original synthetic unity of apperception as the source or origin of all synthesis and all unity (§15).

Even if empirical intuitions are possible that are not determined by the categories or by any concepts at all, this would not mean that these intuitions do not 'stand under' the categories. Kant suggests a distinction between 'standing under' the categories and 'bringing' intuitions under the categories in the following passage: 'all representations given to me stand [under the original synthetic unity of apperception], but ... they must also be brought [under them] by means of a synthesis' (B135–6). Since he argues that 'all sensible intuitions stand under the categories' (B143), this can be understood as saying that they *can* be determined by the categories, not that they already are. They stand ready to be determined through the categories by being brought under them. But in order to be determinable in this way, they must already be such that they involve unity; they must be such that they *can* be accompanied by the 'I think' in thought and judgement. For if they did not involve unity, categorial unity would have to be imposed on them from without, rather than developing out of the unity already there; the transition from 'determinable' to 'determination' would be an alteration or change, not an internal development.

The reason this is worrisome is that it leaves conceptual space for the possibility that the manifold of intuition might have been *determined differently*. And if it could have been determined differently, we would

not be entitled to claim that the forms of appearances are forms of objects of knowledge, or of the objects as they truly are (not just as they seem). By contrast, if the categories represent an act of determination that is already ‘in’ the intuitions as the organs of an organism are ‘in’ the cells from which it emerges, the transition from determinable intuitions to determined ones (or from appearance to phenomenon) could be understood as tracing the development of *knowledge* out of *ignorance*. Intuitions would not be *altered* by the intellect, but would merely become manifest, or emerge in actuality, through the understanding’s determinate use of logical functions of judging in knowing. This means that the understanding – and the unity of apperception – must already be ‘in’ any empirical intuition already in order to preserve the objectivity of the categories: all empirical intuitions must already ‘stand under’ the categories. But it does not mean that they must have already been *brought* under them, or that they already contain the kind of determinacy and necessity that the categories express.

Notes

- 1 Translations from the first *Critique* will be those of Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); from *Metaphysik LI*, cited further on, the translation is from *Lectures on Metaphysics*, trans. Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).