

Kant on the Nature of Inner Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Inner experience is a ubiquitous theme in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787; henceforth, *Critique*), as well as in other works from his Critical period. Yet what inner experience actually means in the context of his Critical philosophy is far from being settled. Kant invokes this notion when he refers to a person's inner states, including such phenomena as sensory perception, thinking, memory, imagination, feeling, will and desire.¹ By observing ourselves through inner sense, we are apparently able to become aware of our occurrent perceptions, emotions, and passing thoughts, as well as our long-term moods, passions, and standing attitudes. Kant also speaks – more technically – of *determining my existence in time, cognizing myself as I appear to myself*, and *connecting my inner appearances and actions*.² Despite the frequent recurrence of this theme, it has aroused much suspicion and perplexity, and little consensus, among the commentators.

Kant's transcendental philosophy – as the enquiry into the necessary conditions of possibility of cognition – has been widely recognised for exposing the central role that the subject plays in constituting knowledge. Yet it is still controversial whether the resulting conception of empirical knowledge, which is primarily defined as empirical cognition of spatiotemporal objects, applies also to the empirical knowledge an individual person has of her own mental states. The specific problem that arises for self-knowledge is, can a subject's inner states be cognised in an *object*-like manner? That is, can the empirical consciousness we have of our own feelings, desires, and thoughts amount to Kantian cognition that fulfils the standards set by the *Critique*?

This book examines the special epistemic status of inner experience as it results from Kant's transcendental theory of knowledge in the *Critique*, and specifies the demands that are placed by the formal structure of our sensory and intellectual faculties. In contrast to the current sceptical trend, I argue that Kant's transcendental philosophy accommodates a substantial notion of empirical self-knowledge and provides resources for a powerful theory of scientific psychology. My claim is that inner experience is a special kind of cognition, which is significantly analogous with the experience of spatiotemporal, physical objects, given certain qualifications regarding its objective

¹ E.g., CpR B277-279; A672/B700; Anthr 7:141-142, 7:161-162.

² For the first notion, see CpR Bxl, A35/B53, B157n, B430-4331; for the second notion, see CpR B68, B155, B157-158; for the third notion, see CpR B156, A672/B700, A683/B711.

validity. The project is motivated by the idea that a more comprehensive picture of Kant's system of knowledge, including knowledge not only of mathematics and of physical objects, but also of biological organisms and of psychological phenomena, will further a deeper understanding of his transcendental philosophy.

Such a project may sound startling or even highly questionable to some readers familiar with Kant's Critical thinking. In fact, it has been widely doubted that transcendental philosophy can provide an adequate account of empirical self-knowledge. Three main concerns have been put forward, all culminating in the claim that inner experience cannot yield empirical cognition of the self as *object*. Firstly, it has been argued that the object-constitutive principles of the understanding cannot be applied to that which is given merely in inner sense and therefore only in time. Rather, Kant's arguments for the object-constitutive character of the pure concepts of the understanding, viz. the categories such as unity, reality, substance, and causality, must appeal – in some sense or other – to space and to outer intuition.³

Secondly, it has been argued that there is a major disparity between inner and outer sense. Inner sense does not yield proper material – or in Kant's terms a manifold of intuition of its own – that could be taken to instantiate the categories; rather, what we find in inner sense is merely a “reappropriation” or re-organization of the data received through outer sense.⁴ Relatedly, it has been claimed that, since inner states – unlike physical states – are perceived to be highly elusive and ever fleeting, it seems implausible that there could be anything permanent in inner sense that would be appropriate to instantiate the category of substance.⁵

Thirdly, Kant's apparent denial of scientific status to empirical psychology in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1785; henceforth *Foundations*) has led many commentators to think that Kant must reject the very possibility of knowledge of psychological phenomena. In the Preface of the *Foundations*, Kant seems to express serious reservations about the mathematisability and the independent observability of inner states, which are taken to be mainly private and therefore not easily publically accessible and moreover to get seriously distorted upon observation by oneself or by others.⁶ These issues have been viewed as revealing fundamental epistemic flaws that

³ Strawson 1966, Washburn 1976, Förster 1987, Westphal 2004, Friedman 2013.

⁴ Allison 2004:278; also Collins 1999, Schmitz 2013.

⁵ Mischel 1967, Gouaux 1972, Nayak/Sotnak 1995, Westphal 2004.

⁶ MFNS 4:471.

disable any knowledge that is purely based on data provided by the inner sense and thus any objective scientific psychology on Kantian grounds.⁷

Despite these misgivings, there have been some positive suggestions with regard to inner experience. Yet the array of accounts that have been put forward does not seem to form a consistent view. Some emphasise the structural parallel between inner and outer sense and endorse a *parity* view of inner experience. They claim that inner experience should be construed analogously to outer experience insofar as both rest on the same set of transcendental conditions, viz. the Principles of the Understanding, despite some basic differences (such as the non-spatiality of inner states or the representational force of the soul in contrast to the attractive and repulsive forces of matter).⁸

Others stress the *disparity* between inner and outer sense and argue that our empirical self-consciousness is more fundamentally dependent on transcendental apperception, which makes it substantially different from the consciousness we have of outer objects. That is, the way we represent ourselves in inner experience is in some sense parasitic on transcendental self-consciousness and can only be explained by appealing to the features of Kant's "I think".⁹

Yet others think that Kant's notion of inner experience can only be meaningfully discussed in the context of moral agency or of pragmatic anthropology. For them, the primary goal of inner experience is *not* to yield theoretical knowledge about oneself, but to help oneself in orientating one's actions in instrumental and moral respects. As such, it is not necessarily an independent source of knowledge, but must be supplemented by third-person knowledge of one's behaviour and character. The primary sources for these interpretations are Kant's writings on anthropology.¹⁰ Yet, while his *Lectures on Anthropology* and especially the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798; henceforth, *Anthropology*) indeed offer crucial methodological advice for the human sciences and depict a rich phenomenology of self-knowledge, these works do not provide a view of inner experience that is fully coherent with and as theoretically sophisticated as the epistemological views articulated in the *Critique*.

My aim in this study is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of inner experience, which answers the worries and considers (and amends) the divergent

⁷ E.g., Gouaux 1972, Mischel 1967, Washburn 1976, Leary 1978, Schönrich 1991, Friedman 2013, Hudson 1994, Klemme 1996, Pollok 2001, Makkreel 2003.

⁸ Vogel 1993, Frierson 2014, Chignell (forthcoming).

⁹ Most clearly, Keller 1998, also Kitcher 1990, 2011, Brook 1994, Ameriks 2000, Rosefeldt 2000, Hatfield 2006, Schmidt 2008.

¹⁰ Most clearly, Sturm 2001, 2009:205-260, also Makkreel 2001, Cohen 2009.

accounts that have been proposed. By shifting the focus of attention to the theoretical question of empirical knowledge of one's own self, I offer an account of the *semantic* and *epistemic* specifics that are inherent to inner experience. Central to my argument is the idea of a thoroughgoing *analogy* between the experience of objects that are distinct from the cognising subject, viz. *outer experience*, and the experience of myself as object, viz. *inner experience*. Nonetheless, this analogy requires certain qualifications. In a nuanced analysis, I argue that both inner and outer experience originate – to a large extent – from the same transcendental set-up of the mind that determines the general form of cognition. Yet there are further formal determinations necessary for inner experience due to its specific foundation in the thinking and cognising subject. In particular it requires a transcendental idea of reason, viz. the soul, which crucially contributes to inner experience by defining a *regulative* principle for ordering and connecting inner appearances; it thereby supplements the Principle of Substance, which is inapplicable in this case. Hence, we cognize our inner states *as if* the soul were given as a persistent object in time (although the soul in fact lacks objective reality). Only by developing a positive evaluation of the idea of the soul, I argue, can we understand why (and how) the Principles of the Understanding (except for that of substance) can be applied to inner appearances in a constitutive or determinative way. The idea of the soul is thus shown to be regulative with regard to the object of inner experience, but constitutive with regard to the representational content of inner experience.

The theme of *parity* and *disparity* between inner and outer experience will recur at different levels of my semantic and epistemological analysis: at the level of perceptual content, as the parity and disparity between inner and outer sense with respect to their different functions in perception and the different kinds of sensible (“*sinnlich*”) content they yield;¹¹ at the level of conceptual content, as the parity and disparity between two sets of Principles of the Understanding (only one of them in need of the regulative principle of the soul); and at the level of the object that is referred to, as the parity and disparity between the outer object, which correspond to intuition, and the inner object, which is only analogically assumed.

Furthermore, my analysis has consequences for a transcendental underpinning of psychology as a theoretical, rather than pragmatic, science. By approaching the object of psychology from the perspective of the self-knowing subject, who – in virtue of having self-knowledge – first establishes a psychological reality of mental states to be grasped in

¹¹ Throughout this study, I use the term “sensible” as a translation of the German term “*sinnlich*”.

the corresponding science, this study offers a novel account of the *Critique*'s implications on the nature of empirical psychology more broadly.

For methodological reasons, the study must carefully reflect on the exact relation between the method of transcendental critique and the human capacity for empirical self-knowledge. Yet my account differs fundamentally from those that tend to psychologise Kant's transcendental philosophy and instead postulate a transcendental psychology.¹² Rather, I enquire into the conditions of possibility of self-knowledge and of scientific psychology from within Kant's Critical Philosophy. In this sense, I distinguish sharply between Kant's own method of transcendental critique on the one hand and the epistemic presuppositions that govern empirical self-knowledge on the other hand. Moreover, I do not intend to provide an exhaustive resolution of the meta-philosophical problems that may be inherent to the *Critique* itself. In this sense, my study differs from those that use a theory of self-knowledge to tackle "meta-critical" questions about the status of Critical thinking itself.¹³ Finally, this study does not lay claim to any historical thesis about the development of Kant's thinking or about the conceptual debates on cognition and psychology in early Modern philosophy, especially among Kant's predecessors and contemporaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.¹⁴

My study faces the problem that Kant never offered a systematic account of inner experience and related conceptions, such as inner sense and empirical psychology, in the context of his Critical philosophy. We can only reconstruct his views from occasional comments that directly refer to inner experience or that indirectly concern matters of psychology. So in addition to the *Critique*, it is necessary to draw on a variety of works from the Critical period (ca. 1781-1798), on which this study focuses, such as the *Foundations* and the *Anthropology*, as already mentioned, as well as the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), his *Lectures on Metaphysics, Logic, and Anthropology*, and his numerous *Reflections* and *Notes* that deal with related themes. Some of these writings are not straightforwardly compatible with the theoretical framework of the *Critique* or do not have the same systematic and authoritative status. This study endeavours to treat them with caution and to remain sensitive to the historical development and context of Kant's views.

¹² Kitcher 1990. Hatfield (2006) adopts the notion of transcendental psychology, but does not read it as a psychological approach to justifying the normative features of cognition.

¹³ Goldman 2007 and 2012.

¹⁴ For studies focussing on historical aspects, see Leary 1978, Klemme 1996, Hatfield 1998, Sturm 2009, Thiel 2011, Dyck 2014, Wuerth 2014.

Hence, my aim is to show *not* that the conception of inner experience developed here literally reflects Kant's actual views of it; rather, that this conception is compatible with what I take to be Kant's account of transcendental philosophy in the *Critique*, and is thus a plausible reconstruction of what he might (or should) have thought about self-knowledge. In general, I proceed by the principle of charity with regard to omissions and apparent inconsistencies in Kant's texts, as I am interested in shaping up – as far as possible – a coherent systematic account of inner experience in accordance with the basic tenets of the *Critique*.

Outline of the chapters

The book consists of three parts, each investigating a different aspect of Kant's conception of *inner experience*. Highlighting the systematic relation with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it largely follows the *Critique's* structure: the first part explores the sensible (“*sinnlich*”) aspects corresponding to the Transcendental Aesthetic; the second the intellectual aspects in accordance with the Transcendental Deduction (Transcendental Analytic) and selected chapters of the Transcendental Dialectic (Paralogisms and Appendix); and the third part, combining intellectual and sensible aspects, discusses selected Principles of the Understanding (Transcendental Analytic) with regard to inner experience.

Part I examines the formal conditions that are imposed on inner experience by the formal structure of our sensible faculties. By producing an interpretation of Kant's conception of *inner sense* I explore the transcendental conditions under which we can have sensible content in inner experience.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for my interpretation of inner experience by introducing the theoretical framework of my study and by assessing common, problematic readings of inner sense. In contrast to a Lockean model of sensibility (which, I argue, still underlies most readings of Kant's account of this faculty), I establish the notion of a transcendental faculty of sensibility: inner and outer sense are shown to be the enabling conditions of experience insofar as they allow for human responsiveness both to subject-internal and to mind-independent, external constraints. I close by demarcating inner and outer sense as transcendental faculties from the physiological senses.

Chapter 2 offers an interpretation of inner sense that accounts for its double task: as the receptive faculty for the passive awareness of oneself, it makes possible both the temporal structure of experience in general, and the distinctively inner experience in

particular that a subject has of her own inner state. Yet this double task can be understood only if inner sense is viewed in relation both to outer sense and to the understanding *qua* capacity to judge or, more generally, to synthesise mental contents. I argue that in the process of forming sensible representations of objects, viz. intuitions, all three faculties work closely together in what Kant calls the *sensible synthesis*.¹⁵ Accordingly, I derive a three-aspect model of intuition formation. I show that this model accounts for intuitions of inner states only if one carefully distinguishes two aspects: transcendental self-affection, which is the effect the understanding has on the form of inner sense, i.e., time; and empirical self-affection, which is the effect empirical (inner) states have on the material content of inner sense. Moreover, I show how the crucial distinction between subjective and objective time is constituted through inner sense.

Part II proceeds to examine the intellectual conditions that are imposed on inner experience by the intellectual faculties, viz. the understanding and reason. It explores whether inner experience can amount to empirical cognition of one's inner states.

Chapter 3 explores those constraints on inner experience that are due to the understanding. It does so in the context of the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. The Transcendental Deduction is meant to show the categories' applicability to sensible intuitions and thereby guarantee the objectivity of our knowledge. I examine to what extent, if at all, the categories can be considered as binding for inner experience. This enquiry provides the ground for answering the question whether that which appears in inner sense can be construed as a full-fledged *object of experience* that can be objectively cognised. By discussing several readings of Kant's famous "*I think*" I show that what I call *transcendental self-consciousness* does not correspond to an epistemic perspective (of the first person), but first implements the subject-object divide and is the transcendental condition of the cognition both of external objects and of oneself.

Chapter 4 goes on to argue that the specific representation of oneself as thinking subject, which arises from transcendental self-consciousness, is not only a transcendental condition, but also part of the representational content of inner experience. It shows that an account of oneself as *object* of inner experience must draw on two seemingly contradictory strategies: on the one hand, such an account depends on the logical representation of the thinking subject as object of thought, viz. the "logical I" (as characterized in the Paralogisms); on the other hand, it must proceed by analogy with the

¹⁵ This interpretation is opposed to recent non-conceptualist readings of Kant that deny the involvement of the understanding in the formation of intuition (e.g., Hanna 2005; Allais 2009).

object of outer experience, which is constituted by applying the categories to sensible intuition. In order to resolve this conflict, one must consider a higher-order principle that mediates between these two strategies. This principle is based on the transcendental idea of the soul, which as the “guiding thread of inner experience” reflects a demand of reason (CpR A672/B700) (cf. Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic). This idea gives rise to the *regulative* principle of inner experience that allows us to cognise our own inner states *as if* they belong to a persisting object in time. I substantiate this interpretation of the soul by drawing on recent accounts of the ideas of reason and of their regulative character, which are offered mainly in connection with idea of the systematicity of nature.

Part III combines the sensible and the intellectual aspects of inner experience and explores the proposed analogy with outer experience for each group of categories by examining in detail the Principles of the Understanding with respect to inner intuitions.

Chapter 5 explores the mathematical-numerical structure of inner intuition, which is the most basic form of categorial determination, derived from the categories of quantity and quality and accounted for by the mathematical principles, viz. the Axioms of Intuition and the Anticipations of Perception. I show that the applicability of these principles to inner intuitions holds without any qualification in the same way as in the case of external spatiotemporal objects. This result revises earlier debates about the mathematisability of psychology knowledge, which centred on a claim Kant makes in the *Foundations*. Yet I argue that this discussion establishes only the mathematical-logical possibility of determining inner intuitions numerically, not the actual feasibility of empirical measurements. I close by offering a refined notion of what counts as real in inner sense.

Chapter 6 examines the Principles of Relation, based on the categories of substance, causality, and community, with respect to inner experience, and discusses the plausibility of several recent interpretations. These principles are necessary to explain how single intuitions are combined into a whole experience of an object. Their applicability to inner intuitions, however, proves more difficult: the Principle of Substance is only analogically applicable, by means of the idea of the soul, as argued in Chapter 4. This qualification leads to constraints on the objective validity of self-cognition: self-cognition primarily determines inner states in subjective time. Yet for the cognition of inner states in objective time, one requires a systematic relation to outer experience, e.g., to one’s bodily states. By analysing the status of inner experience in the Analogies of Experience and the

Refutation of Idealism, I find that a complete account of self-knowledge must explain the causal interaction between mental and bodily states, while acknowledging the difference in kind between the objects of inner and outer experience. Moreover, it must explain the relation between the inner experiences of different cognizers and from different epistemic perspectives.

The *conclusion* reviews the account of inner experience derived from the first *Critique* more widely in the context of Kant's reflections on the empirical sciences. It highlights the particular significance of inner experience for defining the object of psychology as a theoretical, rather than pragmatic, science and reflects on psychology's special scientific status.