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**Kant on the Unity of the Act of Thinking**

In recent decades Kant scholarship has devoted considerable energy to investigating the degree to which the resources of transcendental idealism can complement, correct, or orient the dominant naturalist, physicalist or materialist programs in contemporary philosophy of mind. Central to one optimistic strand of such efforts is the claim that transcendental idealism is an epistemological rather than a metaphysical position. Insofar as Kant rejects transcendent metaphysics in favor of a more sober reflection on the conditions and limits of knowledge, proponents of this line of thought suggest, he is a potential ally of materialism, which is at least in part an attack on the idealist pretensions of metaphysics in general. Kant’s metaphysical neutrality, that is, functions as a kind of metaphysical flexibility. Andrew Brook presents an exemplary illustration of this interpretation.

In *Kant and the Mind*, Brook argues that Kant’s analyses of synthesis, apperceptive self-awareness, and the unity of consciousness are important resources for contemporary philosophy of mind and, moreover, that Kant’s transcendental idealism is perfectly compatible with the prevailing materialist commitments of that field. On the face of it, of course, Kant’s analysis of the conditions of knowledge seems anything but amenable to contemporary materialism. Brook acknowledges this fact and seeks to turn it to his own advantage: “Whatever Kant’s personal views, his overall theory,” Brook argues, “is quite compatible with materialism, especially his epistemology. Because *Kant* was so hostile to materialism, it is easy not to notice that much of the general theory he developed is not.”¹ Kant’s hostility to materialism is rooted, Brook argues, in the threat materialism poses to the doctrines of human freedom and the immortality of the soul, and the related question of the possibility of genuine moral action. Despite these practical motivations for rejecting materialism, however, Brook contends that Kant’s epistemology and its strict limitation of knowledge to the sphere of appearances leaves room for its materialist appropriation. On Brook’s reading,

> What follows [from Kant’s limitation of knowledge to the realm of appearances] is that, so far as the real nature of the mind is concerned, strict ontological neutrality has to be the order of the day [...] If so, and this is the crucial point, materialism has at least as good a chance of being true as [...] any other theory – dualism, [...] idealism, or whatever.²

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¹ Brook, Andrew: *Kant and the Mind*. Cambridge 1994, 16.  
² Brook, Andrew: *Kant and the Mind*. Cambridge 1994, 16.  

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The question I would like to address, then, is whether Brook is right about this. In short, does the unknowability of the mind as it is in itself indicate the compatibility of transcendental idealism and contemporary materialism? Can we, that is, isolate Kant’s anti-materialist practical commitments from his purportedly metaphysically neutral epistemological analysis of the conditions and limits of knowledge in order to put the latter into fruitful conversation with contemporary philosophical concerns?

I am not so sure. Kant’s transcendental idealism, I argue, cannot be neatly divided into a metaphysically neutral epistemology and a now-outdated idealist metaphysics of the soul. The epistemological facets of transcendental idealism are, I believe, bound up with implicit metaphysical principles. To apply the insights of Kant’s epistemology in the contemporary materialist or naturalist context thus requires a direct engagement with the metaphysics on which his epistemology is based. This engagement, moreover, is possible only on the basis of an historical investigation that makes the implicit metaphysics of transcendental idealism visible in the first place. In this vein, I will try to show here that Kant’s rejection of both materialist and rationalist accounts of the self in the first Critique relies in part on a metaphysical distinction between the internal unity of the act of thinking and the merely external unity characteristic of the actions of natural objects. In the end, the importance of the real difference between internally and externally unified activity for Kant’s analysis of the spontaneity of original apperception commits him to a rationalist metaphysical conception of unity and multiplicity that is not obviously compatible with materialism.

My discussion of Kant and materialism focuses on the criticism of his rational psychological analysis of the simplicity of the soul in the Second Paralogism. This chapter cuts to the heart of the matter insofar as it directly addresses the apparent incompatibility of the logical simplicity of transcendental apperception and the composite nature of material objects. Kant presents the syllogistic form of the rational psychological argument for the simplicity of the soul as follows:

That, the action of which can never be regarded as the concurrence of several things acting, is simple.
Now, the soul, or the thinking ‘I’, is such a being.
Therefore, etc.³

What is striking about this formulation of the rational psychologist’s argument is the definition of simplicity Kant provides in the major premise. Wolff, Baumgart-

en, and Knutzen all define simplicity with respect to a thing’s composition: if a thing comprises real parts, then it is composite; if not, it is simple. Rather than adopting this common definition, Kant instead recasts the definition of simplicity in terms of a thing’s actions rather than its composition. This change might appear to offer the possibility of securing a stronger result concerning the nature of the soul. Even if we cannot know the soul as it is in itself through experience, one might think it could nevertheless be possible to infer its simplicity through an analysis of the spontaneous activity of transcendental apperception. In other words, the transcendence of the soul as it is in itself prevents me from directly determining whether it is composed of parts, and so from applying the traditional definition of simplicity. Unlike the soul itself, however, the actions of the soul, that is, the original spontaneity of the mind, is available to consciousness, and so might legitimately be used to infer the simplicity of the soul in itself. By altering the definition of simplicity, the task of ascertaining the soundness of the syllogism is redirected from an analysis of the soul to an analysis of the actions of the soul. In this respect, Kant’s explanation of the argument of the simplicity of the soul recalls the connection between the simplicity of the soul and the activity of thinking throughout the tradition of rational psychology. Although this shift toward an analysis of the activity of thought appears to secure the doctrine of the simplicity of the soul against the charge surpassing the limits of knowledge, we will see that it still cannot by Kant’s lights prove the real simplicity of the soul.

Kant’s explication of the rationalist argument for the simplicity of the soul proceeds in two steps. First he explains what actions can be considered as the coordination of a series of distinct substances, and then he fleshes out the claim that the activity of thought cannot be accounted for on that basis. Given that all material bodies are composite, a successful argument for the non-composite nature of the activity of thought would refute any materialist accounts of the self. “Every composite substance is an aggregate of several substances,” Kant writes, “and the action of a composite, of whatever inheres in it as thus composite, is an aggregate of several actions or accidents, distributed among the plurality of the substances.”

If a thing comprises a plurality of substances, that is, its actions must be similarly composite because a composite thing cannot produce simple actions. Kant offers the motions of the body as an example of such a composite action that is rooted in a composite, material substance. The galloping of a horse is composite insofar as it is the aggregate of the movements of the parts of the horse’s body. Although there is a kind of unity to this activity,
it is a merely external unity. The activity of galloping is composed of the specific motions of the horse’s ankles, legs, neck, etc. Further, each of these motions is itself composed of a series of biological and chemical processes. There is not an internal connection, however, between the actions of the horse’s various muscles; they are entirely capable of independent action. Bodily motion, that is, is a complex coordination of the activities of distinct substances, and any action that possesses the kind of external unity that characterizes bodily motion can and should be regarded as the effect of the concurrence of several active substances.

The actions of the soul, the rational psychologist argues, are entirely different. Unlike the externally unified motions of a body, thoughts have an internal unity. To motivate this claim, Kant offers a *reductio*. If a composite substance could think, he writes, “then every part of [the composite] would be a part of the thought, and only all of them taken together would contain the whole thought”.⁵ With the parts of the thought distributed among the aggregated substances, however, there would be no single part of the composite whole that contains the whole thought. Consequently, that thought would not really be a thought, but a series of thought fragments. Something must unify these thought fragments if they are to become a single thought, and the merely external unity of the coordinated actions of a composite substance is insufficient to the task. “For,” he continues, “representations (for instance, the single words of a verse), distributed among different beings, never make up a whole thought (a verse), and it is therefore impossible that a thought should inhere in what is essentially composite.”⁶ There must be a simple ground that unifies the manifold contained in a thought. The simple ground of the unity of my thoughts can be nothing other than the ultimate subject of those thoughts – the self or soul – and so the soul must be simple. The internal unity of the act of conscious representation is, in other words, different in kind from the external unity of the coordinated activity of a material body. As such, the ground of the unity of thought must also be different in kind from the composite nature of bodies.

Adopting a critical stance, Kant glosses the central claim of the rationalist argument for the simplicity of the soul as follows: “if a multiplicity of representations are to form a single representation, they must be contained in the absolute unity of the thinking subject”.⁷ This proposition cannot, Kant argues, be proven in any of the three possible arguments, namely, (1) through concepts alone

⁵ Kant: KrV, A352.
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⁷ Kant: KrV, A352.
(that is, analytically), (2) through experience (that is, synthetically), or (3) by inference from experience. Insofar as none of these possible proofs is conclusive, Kant argues, one cannot know the soul to be simple. This is of course the reason we might take transcendental idealism to be metaphysically neutral. A closer consideration of Kant’s discussion of the third kind of proof, which infers the simplicity of the soul from experience, calls this position into question.

The simplicity of the soul as a real object is not the result of logical inference from the bare ‘I think,’ Kant maintains. Rather, “The proposition, ‘I am simple’, must be regarded as an immediate expression of apperception, just as what is referred to as the Cartesian inference, cogito, ergo sum, is really a tautology, since the cogito (sum cogitans) asserts my existence immediately.” This marks a transition in Kant’s remarks on the Paralogism. Whereas the previous two objections – to possible proofs through concepts and experience – focused on the fruitlessness of speculation concerning the real simplicity of the soul, Kant here accepts that the necessity of the ‘I think’ is immediate evidence of the reality of the soul. What exactly this reality consists in, however, is misapprehended in the rationalist tradition.

The simplicity immediately contained in the necessarily subjective proposition ‘I think’ is not real or objective, but logical or transcendental. “This much, then, is certain,” Kant explains, “that through the ‘I’, I always entertain the thought of an absolute, but logical, unity of the subject.” If the ‘I’ were not an absolute unity, it would be possible for me to have thoughts I would not know to be my thoughts. “It does not, however, follow,” he continues, “that I thereby know the actual simplicity of my subject.” As he argued concerning proofs from experience, the ‘I’ can never be an object of experience, and so no objective judgments concerning its simplicity are possible. Summarizing the results of his reflection on the legitimate meaning of the unity of apperception, Kant writes:

I may legitimately say: ‘I am a simple substance’, that is, a substance the representation of which never contains a synthesis of the manifold. But this concept, as also the proposition, tells us nothing whatsoever in regard to myself as an object of experience, since the concept of substance is itself used only as a function of synthesis, without any underlying intuition, and therefore without an object. It concerns only the condition of our knowledge; it does not apply to any assignable object.

8 Kant: KrV, A354 f.
9 Kant: KrV, A356.
10 Kant: KrV, A356.
11 Kant: KrV, A356.
Taken transcendentally, that is, as the condition of experience in general, the soul can only be regarded as a simple unity; taken as an object of philosophical or theological speculation, however, there are no grounds for positively establishing either the simple or composite nature of the soul. The conclusion of Second Paralogism is, then, that nothing positive can be established regarding the simple or composite nature of the soul.

At this point, Brook’s claim that Kant’s personal and moral hostility to materialism does not preclude its compatibility with his analysis of the transcendental simplicity of the original apperception looks compelling. We cannot know what the ground of consciousness is in itself, and so Kant’s larger epistemological analysis might well be fitted – even if uncomfortably – to contemporary materialist cognitive science. Insofar as we cannot know the soul to be simple, the argument goes, a careful reader of Kant cannot foreclose the possibility that transcendental idealism is compatible with contemporary materialist programs.

I do not think, however, that Kant’s position is as metaphysically neutral as many make out. Although we cannot know anything about what the soul is as an object or a thing, Kant is clear in the Deduction that we are nonetheless conscious of ourselves as spontaneously active. I am conscious of my self as an act even if the soul cannot be represented as an object of experience. The error of rational psychology ultimately stems, Kant explains, from its failure to separate things from act. The Wolffians tie the uniquely simple act of representation to the simplicity of the thing that represents. Once we untangle the spontaneous act of thinking from the unknown ground of the thinking thing, however, the paralogistic nature of rational psychology becomes visible.

Kant underlines the importance of the real distinction between things and the act of thinking in the B edition of the Paralogisms, where he focuses on the formal error of the rationalist argument for the substantiality of the soul. The argument, which Kant takes to represent both the structure and fatal error of all the rational psychologist’s arguments, runs as follows:

What cannot be thought otherwise than as a subject does not exist otherwise than as a subject, and it is therefore a substance.
Now a thinking being, considered merely as such, cannot be thought otherwise than as subject.
Therefore it also exists as such a thing, i.e., as substance.¹²

¹² Kant: KrV, B410f.
The structure of this argument clearly resembles the argument for the simplicity of the soul Kant presents in the A version of the Second Paralogism, so Kant’s remarks about this argument also shed light on the failure of arguments for the simplicity of the soul. Kant explains the problem with this argument as follows:

In the first [major premise] we are speaking of things [Dingen] which cannot be thought otherwise than as subjects; but in the second [minor premise] we speak not of things [Dingen] but of thinking [Denken] (abstraction being made from all objects) in which the ‘I’ always serves as the subject of consciousness.¹³

The error lies in mistaking an activity, thinking, for a thing, a substantial soul. Activities, and the activity of thinking in particular, Kant claims, are different in kind from things, such that what holds of the latter does not necessarily hold of the former. In the A edition Second Paralogism, Kant denies that the concept of simplicity is analytically contained in the concept of a thought, ein Gedanke. Here, however, he draws our attention to the crucial difference between things – and thoughts, as objects or inner sense, are certainly things – and the activity of thinking, Denken. We are conscious, Kant argues in the B Deduction, of the internal unity of the spontaneous synthetic activity of thinking. This is why he declares it absurd that I could be said to have a thought of which I am unaware. The question this raises in the context of our consideration of Brook’s materialist appropriation of Kant is whether Kant’s view of thinking as a real, simple activity rather than a thing that lies beyond the scope of any possible experience is as metaphysically neutral as Brook contends.

It is crucial to recall in this regard what Kant does and does not reject in the course of his analysis of the rationalist account of the simplicity of the soul. The rationalist argument is paralogistic because our immediate consciousness of the absolute unity of the activity of thought cannot prove the necessity of the simplicity of some underlying thing, the soul. What he does not deny is that composite things are incapable of explaining the internal unity of the activity of conscious representation. Insofar as the soul is taken as an activity rather than a thing, Kant is committed to the metaphysical impossibility of explaining the unity of consciousness with reference to any composite thing. The internal unity of the spontaneous activity of thinking, that is, cannot be reduced to the coordinated activity of a plurality of substances. The unity of the spontaneous activity of transcendental apperception is, in other words, different in kind to the unity of the galloping of a horse.

¹³ Kant: KrV, B412 (translation modified).
The distinction between the internal unity of the activity of self-conscious representation and the external unity of the actions of natural things depends upon an implicit metaphysical distinction between two kinds of unity in actions. Insofar as the internal unity of the spontaneity of thought is, on Kant’s account, found nowhere in the natural world, Kant’s transcendental analytic implicitly affirms a dualism that separates the spontaneity of the thinking subject from the composite objects of the material world. This dualism and the rationalist metaphysics of activity and unity that requires it, is a metaphysical not an empirical result, a result that commends a reconsideration of the metaphysical neutrality or flexibility of the central elements of transcendental idealism.