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## SOMMARIO

## KANT AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

ANGELA BREITENBACH, <i>Kant on the Value of Nature</i>	11
HELGA VARDEN, <i>Kant and the Enviroment</i>	27
STEFANO LO RE, <i>A Kantian Argument for Sustainable Property Use</i>	49
LAURA MARCON, KLAUDIJO KLASER, <i>Il senso di fare la cosa giusta: Rawls e Kant sugli accordi climatici</i>	65
HOPE SAMPLE, <i>A Kantian Approach to Climate Ethics: Prospects and Problems</i>	83

## DEUTSCH-ITALIENISCHE KANT-VORLESUNG

BÉATRICE LONGUENESSE, <i>Kant on 'the Self' and 'the I'</i>	99
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## STUDI

RÔMULO EISINGER GUIMARÃES, <i>If Judgements of Taste are Disinterested, Why Does Beauty Matter So Much to Us? On the Interests in the Beautiful in Kant</i>	123
SOFIE MØLLER, <i>Hindsight and Foresight in Kant's Historical Sign</i>	145

## SYMPOSIUM: KANT AND IMMIGRATION

ROBERTA PICARDI, <i>Kant's Cosmopolitan Right within the Current Debate on Migration: The Conflicting Interpretations of David Miller and Karoline Reinhardt</i>	161
KAROLINE REINHARDT, <i>A Right to Migrate? On The Virtue of Productive Dis-harmony</i>	167
DAVID MILLER, <i>What Kant Might Have Said About Immigration: An Alternative View</i>	177

## DISCUSSIONI

DIETMAR HEIDEMANN, <i>Self-Knowledge and the Problem of Existence</i>	189
MARTIN STICKER, <i>The Use of the Formula of Humanity</i>	199

## RECENSIONI

RUDOLF MEER, <i>Der transzendente Grundsatz der Vernunft. Funktion und Struktur des Anhangs zur transzendentalen Dialektik der Kritik der reinen Vernunft</i> (D. Del Bianco)	209
KATHARINA KRAUS, <i>Kant on Self-Knowledge and Self-Formation: The Nature of Inner Experience</i> (R. Zanette de Araujo)	215
OWEN WARE, <i>Kant's Justification of Ethics</i> (J. Tizzard)	221
FLORIAN MARWEDE, <i>Das höchste Gut in Kants deontologischer Ethik</i> (L. Perulli)	225

HELGA VARDEN, <i>Sex, Love, and Gender. A Kantian Theory</i> (M. Marey)	229
<i>Kant on Freedom and Spontaneity</i> , edited by Kate A. Moran (L. Volontè)	233
Bollettino bibliografico, a cura di Luigi Filieri e Lorenzo Sala	237
Sigle delle opere di Kant	247
Autori	251
Libri ricevuti	253

# SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND THE PROBLEM OF EXISTENCE

DIETMAR HEIDEMANN<sup>\*</sup>

**ABSTRACT** · In his book *Kant and the Problem of Self-Knowledge* Luca Forgone argues that the semantic, epistemic and metaphysical analysis of Kant's theory of self-knowledge is possible within the frame of a merely formal understanding of 'I'. Although the author shows that for Kant self-knowledge is in fact knowledge of a formal thinking subject, there remains the difficulty that the formal analysis of self-knowledge entails the existence claim about the transcendental apperception. This claim is incompatible, I argue, with Kant's theory of the analytic and synthetic unity of apperception.

**KEYWORDS** · Self-knowledge; I think; I am; Transcendental Apperception; Existence.

LUCA FORGIONE's book *Kant and the Problem of Self-Knowledge* (New York, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, 214 pages) is an instructive contribution to the still ongoing debate about the status, nature and structure of the cognitive I or subject in Kant's theoretical philosophy. Kant's moral philosophy is not considered in order to not over-complicate this already complex topic. As such, self-knowledge is a key-topic of classical metaphysics that has received increasing attention in scholarship on Kant's theory of the self. Whereas classical metaphysics was predominantly interested in claims and proofs about the substantiality, immortality or simplicity of the soul, contemporary Kant scholarship is rather focusing on questions about the possibility of (pure and empirical) self-consciousness, self-reference, self-identification, *De re*-, *De dicto* and *De se*-thoughts and more generally on the cognitive structure of knowing one's own thoughts. The author's interest is not historical in the first place but systematic and therefore orientated towards the latter topics. His aim is «to enquire about the theoretical aspects of Kant's philosophy that are connected to the representation 'I'» with respect to three layers the topic of self-knowledge exhibits: «(1) a semantic question regarding the type of reference of the representation 'I', (2) an epistemic question regarding the type of knowledge relative to the thinking subject produced by the representation 'I think', and (3) a strictly metaphysical question regarding the features assigned to the thinking subject's nature» (pp. 1-2). Given the systematic orientation of the book, this division makes sense, especially since it also covers some of the issues of classical metaphysics that a study of self-knowledge in Kant cannot ignore. The author makes productive use of this threefold heuristic scheme within the five chapters of his book: The first chapter provides a somewhat introductory discussion of the concept of self-consciousness in terms of first-person consciousness and consciousness of the self as object. In this chapter the author also considers the indexicality of first-person pronouns and the problem of misidentification. The claim is that Kant can tackle these problems within a transcendental frame. The second chapter

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discusses the formal ownership reading in relation to the *I think*. The author attributes two fundamental meanings to the *I think*: 1) the *I think* as the act of apperception and 2) the representational 'nature' of the *I think*. In connection with the latter the author defends three theses: First, that *metaphysically* thinking must be conceived as 'spontaneity'; secondly, that *epistemically* thinking is not to be conceived as the object of knowledge, and thirdly, that *semantically* the *I think* is nothing over and above the «representational vehicle for the concept of the transcendental subject» (p. 4; cf. 49-52) as expressed by the index word 'I'. In chapters three, four and five, the author implements the distinction of the *metaphysical*, *epistemic* and *semantic* layer in more detail. In chapter three he elaborates on what he terms «transcendental designation», i.e., Kant's specific view of self-identification. It is here where philosophy of language and linguistics come into play. The crucial question is whether for Kant self-reference is possible without self-identification. Chapter four offers a more detailed analysis of this question by exploring what Kant means by *I* as the simple and empty representation. The author argues that transcendental designation and Kant's conception of indexicality cannot be spelled out in terms of the theory of direct reference. In that respect the author is rather pessimistic about the possibility to come to terms with Kant's theory of self-knowledge within the boundaries of philosophy of language alone. In the final chapter five he considers whether the distinction between *de re*- and *de se*-thoughts can contribute to grasping Kant's conception of self-knowledge. In this context he rules out the possibility of assimilating intuition and *de re*-knowledge by putting forward 'weak conceptualism'. *De se*-thoughts in Kant are associated with a number of contemporary views. In conclusion, the author claims that the dichotomy of the *I think* on the one hand, and the *I* as empirical object on the other, can be overcome by way of conceiving the *I think* as a merely formal representation.

The thematic spectrum of Forgione's book is very rich, both with respect to Kant as well as with respect to contemporary philosophy of language (and mind). Here I shall discuss in more detail the systematic connection between what Kant terms the simple representation *I* and the conception of transcendental designation the author attributes to Kant in chapter four. For the overall project of the book and specifically for the author's claim to overcome the (alleged) Kantian split between the intellectual representation *I think* and the *I* as empirical object this aspect is pivotal. Since on the author's reading the formal, logical *I* does not designate an object, although it does provide knowledge that it exists. The compatibility of the formal, logical *I* and the knowledge of its own existence is at the heart of Kant's theory of the self and has puzzled interpreters for a long time.

Before I can turn to the discussion of this important part of the authors account of Kant's theory of self-knowledge, some aspects of the methodological approach of the book need to be addressed. In his interpretation the author employs conceptual tools of more recent or contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics. This approach seems to be problematic. For one might object that as a matter of fact Kant is simply not concerned with philosophy of language or linguistics; at least he does not explicitly use the terminology of (linguistic) reference, indexicality, semantics and the like in the way it is employed in contemporary philosophy. The author might object that this is a rather formal worry since it is perfectly legitimate to use these means with the aim to better understand Kant's views. This cannot be denied but the con-

cern I have is more basic in the sense that for principal reasons a linguistic analysis cannot be applied to Kant's doctrines. The most critical point in that respect is that Kant does not conceive of judgments as linguistic entities, *i.e.*, sentences. It is true that for Kant judgments count as propositions if propositions are understood as bearers of truth or falsehood. According to Kant, nothing can be true or false except for a judgment. However, judgments are composed of concepts, not of words; concepts are representations whereas words are not, at least not in the Kantian sense; and concepts have their own peculiar grammar, *i.e.*, the 'grammar' of the understanding (cf. *ProI*, AA IV 322f.) as Kant terms it, namely the logical functions of judgments that must be conceived as categories if taken as determinations of intuitions. The fundamental difference between (pre-linguistic) concept and word as part of language is a methodological difficulty for any linguistic interpretation of Kant's theoretical philosophy. This is especially true of Kant's theory of self-knowledge since for Kant the possibility of self-knowledge does not depend on linguistic (grammatical) preconditions but on concepts as possible predicates of judgments. Although the author does not address this important difficulty at length, he is not ignoring it either. This is clear not least from his aforementioned distinction between semantic, epistemic and metaphysical questions the problem of self-knowledge involves. It would therefore be unfair to reproach the author with turning Kant's theoretical philosophy into philosophy of language. On the other hand, the partly linguistic approach to certain elements of the Kantian theory remains a difficulty that the author should have discussed to some extent.

Employing linguistic theory and concepts can nonetheless contribute to elucidating Kant's theory of self-knowledge. This can be seen from the author's analysis of the relation between the representation *I* and transcendental designation in chapter four. Since the aim is to disconnect Kant's theory of the *I* from the contemporary theory of direct reference, the author starts with the contemporary theory of direct reference with respect to the *I think* (pp. 104-109). On the author's reading two points are important: first, the *I* of self-knowledge is an indexical that directly refers to the subject as the originator of the term 'I'; secondly, the direct reference of *I* rules out identification acts such that misidentification of the *I* as *I* is not possible or irrelevant. *Prima facie* it looks as if Kant's theory can be interpreted along these lines. This, however, the author argues, is not the case. In order to show why Kant does not hold a theory of direct reference he turns to the contemporary debate about Kantian non-conceptualism and the question of whether or not intuition is representational independently of concepts. For advocates of non-conceptualism have argued that this is in fact the case such that intuition as *repraesentatio singularis* seems to provide the basis for the theory of direct reference in Kant. For according to Kant, intuition can be characterized as representation that is by nature singular, immediate, object dependent, related to sensibility and prior to thought (pp. 112-113). As the author points out, some non-conceptualists claim that the relatedness to sensibility indicates that intuition is 'indexical representation' for Kant, *i.e.*, like 'singular terms' intuitional representations are 'directly referential' (cf. Kaplan, Kripke, Putnam) independent of concept use (pp. 113-114).

The author dismisses this connection between intuition and singular terms by first looking into the logical form of singular judgments (pp. 114-115) and, more im-

portantly for his interpretation, by discussing some aspects concerning Kant's theory of concepts (pp. 114-116). He shows why Kant's theory of concepts does not allow for the representation of an individual by merely conceptual means because Kant distinguishes – somewhat classically – between the intention (*Begriffsinhalt*) and extension (*Begriffsumfang*) of concepts such that the relation among concepts must be conceived through abstraction as a hierarchical order of genus and species. As a consequence, there cannot be a lowest species or *infima species* (*contra* Leibniz) for each concept can, in principle, be further determined. However, for the highest genus, the *sumum genus*, this is not the case since here maximum generality is achieved. The author does not discuss this issue any further although it seems to be a problem for Kant that there is one (kind of) concept that escapes, as one might call it, the principle of conceptual determination, according to which each (abstract) concept can function likewise as a genus for species and must itself be conceived as a species under a genus. For the *sumum genus* this doesn't seem to be the case since here there is *per definitio* no higher genus under which it can possibly stand. To put it differently, for any abstract, discursive concept it is the case that it can function as a species under a higher genus; now the *sumum bonum* is an abstract, discursive concept but cannot function as a species. Maybe this inconsistency does not affect the author's interpretation of self-knowledge as such, although it might affect his take on the Kantian distinction between concept and intuition as it is relevant for his overall argument. Be it as it may, the – to my mind – correct claim put forward by the author in this context is that Kant allows for the singular use of a concept in a singular judgment (pp. 116-117).

Now the author specifies two conditions for conceptual representation (concepts): first, the 'condition of existence' is that a concept must represent an existing spatio-temporal object through 'intervention by intuition' (I take it that the author exclusively means concepts referring to external objects); second, the 'uniqueness condition' is that a concept must represent an object «through the specific features that only that particular object possesses» (p. 117). Given these two conditions, it is only possible to (re)identify that object by employing the concept under which the object falls. For only concepts can be 'reapplied' or 'misapplied' when identifying objects, whereas intuitions cannot. As it looks then, *e.g.*, demonstratives like 'this' turn a (general) concept into a singular term like 'this thing' (pp. 117-118). I am not quite sure whether this is the case in Kant. For Kant space and time are the principles of individuation for objects given in sensible intuition. The transcendental conditions for cognizing or perceiving given objects are the principles of the pure understanding, in particular the axioms of intuition. The transcendental schematism mediates between what is given in intuition, the singular THING, and the concept specifying it as *this thing*. If there is a conceptual solution to the problem of referring demonstratives to what is given in singular representation, it would be the transcendental schematism of imagination to look at. Unfortunately, Kant rather ignores the details of how (conceptual) reference works in detail. In the end, however, his claim seems to be that the transcendental imagination passes spontaneously over from concept to intuition, which is singular no matter what, with the help of transcendental schemata as the hybrids that are partly conceptual, partly intuitive. Kant's explanations of how this works are rather cryptic. The main difficulty here lies in the fact that the structure of



concepts is (discursive) subordination, whereas the structure of intuition is coordination (of spatio-temporal parts), and it is hard to see how both can 'merge'. Even the term 'this thing' remains, for Kant, a (conceptual) generality that singles out an object only in combination with, e.g., a pointing gesture.

This does, however, by no means suggest that for (re-)identification concepts are a *conditio sine qua non*. This is already clear from the essay *Concerning the Ultimate Foundation of the Distinction of the Directions in Space* (1768). In this essay Kant demonstrates that with respect to incongruent counterparts it is in fact possible to distinguish between given objects in space and time completely independent of concepts. In order to know that, e.g., a given glove does fit on my right hand, I cannot rely on merely conceptual information, i.e., description of the spatial relations of the parts of the glove. For the descriptions of a left-hand glove and a right-hand glove would be identical as they are descriptions of incongruent counterparts. I must rather try *in intuition* whether the glove does fit or not completely independent of concepts. It is hence possible to distinguish and represent objects by merely intuitional means. Similarly, according to the first argument of space of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to represent «certain sensations» as being «related to something outside me» means that I represent that there is «something in another place in space from that in which I find myself». I simply know that the place in space where I am, i.e., *this* place, is not identical with 'another place', i.e., the place in space where I am not, which means that I can distinguish between both places independently of concepts. And as Kant explicitly says, this accounts for 'different places' in space and not just for being (logically or conceptually) distinct or 'different' (*KrV*, A 23 B 38). For these reasons it doesn't seem to be true that on the author's reading «the intuitive dimension alone cannot even identify something spatio-temporally located as an object.» (p. 118).<sup>1</sup>

It is thus obvious why the author claims that there is a connection between non-conceptualism and the theory of direct reference, the theory that he thinks cannot be attributed to Kant's conception of self-knowledge. Non-conceptualism implicates a kind of direct reference of representation in intuition, i.e., the view that in intuition cognizers can represent objects independently of concepts. Analogously, with respect to self-knowledge the theory of direct reference holds that the I as an intellectual representation refers to itself independently of any conceptually mediated act of identification. Since the author dismisses non-conceptualism (cf. pp. 148-152), he, as a consequence, also dismisses direct reference of the I.<sup>2</sup> The dismissal of the direct-reference interpretation of Kant's I is what he needs in order to defend his overall claim about the purely formal character of the I within a conceptualist reading of the theory of self-knowledge. I basically agree with the author's view that Kant does not belong into the camp of the direct reference theorists. But as we will see, the author's rejection of the direct reference theory of the I leads to a problem he cannot, to my mind, handle, i.e., the problem of the formal I's knowledge «that it exists» (p. 138).

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the *KrV* are from I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (trans. and ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> It is a different kind of question whether this does necessarily mean that one cannot be a non-conceptualist while holding the theory of direct reference.

How does this problem come about in the author's interpretation? After rejection of the theory of direct reference, the author goes on to show in more detail why Kant should not be seen as an advocate of such a theory and what the ultimately true theory of transcendental designation looks like. He portrays the situation as follows:

The *I* is a simple representation, which does not convey any content and simply signifies 'a something in general' or 'a transcendental subject': As the properties of a thinking being are entirely abstracted, this is designated through the completely empty of content expression "*I*". In this scenario, if the *I* simply signifies 'a something in general', namely 'a transcendental subject', then the *I* is a representational *unicum*, as it is neither intuition nor concept. (p. 131)

One major difficulty with Kant's theory of self-knowledge is that the *I* is described as a simple and empty representation ('*Vorstellung*'), while at the same time Kant explicitly says that the «*I* is no more an intuition than it is a concept» (*KrV*, A 381-382). The problem is that according to Kant's cognitive dualism, intuition and concept are kinds of representation, more specifically they are the *only* kinds of representation. Hence, if the *I* is neither intuition nor concept, what is it? One cannot blame the author for not having a ready-made solution for this problem. Even Kant himself cannot but accept that the concept 'representation' is unavoidable when addressing mental and cognitive phenomena. The author therefore keeps the phrase 'the representation *I*' while emphasizing that *I* is an empty representation devoid of content. The natural question to ask then is: If the *I* is an empty representation, is it at all designating anything and if so what is it designating and how? The author answers this question as follows: First, the representation *I* is designating but since it is an empty representation it is not designating any determinate *I* but the merely formal, logical *I*. As the author puts it: The *I* «is nothing but an existence devoid of properties; the subject is able to know that it exists as a thinking being (B157, B159 [...]) but is not able to know what it is.» (p. 134). Secondly, the *I* designates transcendentially, *i.e.*, as the logical implication of the synthetic unity of apperception. For in order to conceive of the analytic unity of the same consciousness within a united manifold, the synthetic unity of apperception must be presupposed as the thought that it is one and the same consciousness (*I*) of the synthesis of the manifold (pp. 136-137; 138-139).

Transcendental designation of the *I* is thus spelled out in terms of the epistemic dependence-relation between the analytic and synthetic unity of apperception that Kant establishes in § 16 of the transcendental deduction (*KrV*, B 131-136). This relation is merely semantic since it is, for Kant, an analytic relation. Mainly for this reason the author argues, correctly I think, that Kant's theory of self-knowledge is not based on token-reflexive rules such that *I* is directly referring to the subject of an *I*-thought in a *de re*-manner, for the *I* is an empty, logical representation that does not allow for self-identification on the basis of any given property. It is clear that the rejection of a direct theory of reference, *e.g.*, via self-acquaintance as expressed through the representation *I*, forces the author to favor a conceptualist understanding of self-knowledge, not least because the *I* cannot count as an intuition in Kant. On the author's reading Kant's theory of self-knowledge amounts to an intellectualist conception of self-identification, as one might call it, a conception that grounds self-knowledge on merely logical or conceptual relations as the transcendental condition of the possibility of thought and irrespective of determinate properties of self-identification. That

is, Kant's theory of self-knowledge is not a theory of biographical, temporal self-identification. As a consequence, the conceptualist theory of self-knowledge cannot be conceived in terms of *de dicto*-identification either, for there is no transcendental subject that the *I* could possibly designate on the basis of properties pertaining to that subject. In a nutshell, the author dismisses two main options of interpreting Kantian self-knowledge: 1.) the *de re*-view according to which Kantian self-knowledge takes the form 'I know of myself that I think and that I am.', and 2.) the *de dicto*-view according to which Kantian self-knowledge takes the form 'I know that I think and that I am.'

I agree with the author that Kant does not fit into the *de re*-/*de dicto*-scheme since in transcendental idealism self-knowledge is «grounded in the principle of transcendental apperception, which is only possible under the presupposition of a synthetic unity» (p. 137). Whether Kant is therefore «as Humean as Hume himself» (p. 138), as the author nicely puts it, depends on how strong Kant's alleged Humeanism is conceived here. In so far as Kant rejects knowledge of a real, metaphysical self and only preserves the formal thought of an 'analytic' *I* as the same consciousness within a synthetic manifold, this might have a Humean touch. But Kant clearly dismisses the overall psychologist setting of Hume's bundle-theory of the *I*. He rather makes the *I* a transcendental condition of judgment in that the analytic unity guarantees the logical identity of the *I* under the principle of the synthetic unity of apperception. This unity takes the logical form of a judgment according to rules of synthesis and is not to be thought of as an elusive association of representations in inner sense. But the heart of the problem of self-knowledge is that the analytic and synthetic unity of apperception do not inform us about the *I*'s existence. In classical metaphysics like in Cartesian ontological dualism the existence of the soul or thinking *I* has always been the major issue and one should expect Kant to have closed the case. *Prima facie* this actually seems to be so since according to Kant's critique Descartes' *primo cognitio*, the *I*'s existence cannot be derived from the *I*'s thinking. The author is fully aware of Kant's dismissal of this kind of Cartesian metaphysical self-knowledge. On the other hand, he repeatedly emphasizes that although transcendental designation rules out 'material' self-knowledge, it leaves the propertyless, formal *I* with knowledge of its existence: «the representation *I* is nothing but an existence devoid of properties» and «the subject is able to know that it exists as a thinking being» (p. 134); the *I* even «stands for an existence» (p. 136); it is a «fact» «that it exists» (p. 138) and «presents a designative function referring to something that really exists» in terms of the «spontaneity» of the «synthetic unity of apperception» (p. 138-139). To be clear, 'existence' is here not attributed to the empirical self-consciousness or *I* in inner sense but to the pure, formal *I* of transcendental apperception. It is this existence-claim that undermines a great deal of the author's overall argument.

The author does not falsely attribute the claim that the transcendental apperception entails existence or is itself to be construed as an existing being to Kant. Kant himself says it: «in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am.» (*KrV*, B 157) As a consequence of cognitive restriction, the *I* knows, or better: cognizes itself only as appearance and not as a thing-in-itself or *noumenon*. Self-knowledge is only possible in inner sense as appearance since the conceptual analysis of 'I' will not allow for any cognition of the (existence) of the *I* (*KrV*, B 402). The cognitive relation between the

pure or formal (transcendental) and the empirical or phenomenal *I* is asymmetric: Whereas the pure or formal *I*'s self-reference does not produce self-knowledge, the empirical or phenomenal *I*'s self-reference provides some sort of self-knowledge in inner sense. Empirical or phenomenal self-knowledge is for Kant expressed in propositions like: 'I know that I am *now* thinking and existing *here* as a physical being'.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what Kant is claiming, however, this kind of knowledge cannot be entailed in the pure or formal *I*'s cognitive self-reference. There is self-reference, yes, but this kind of formal self-reference is without knowledge of one's own existence. In the transcendental deduction Kant states that the «principle» of the «original synthetic unity of apperception» «is not a principle for every possible understanding, but only for one through whose pure apperception in the representation I am nothing manifold is given at all.» (*KrV*, B 137-138). But how is it possible that 'pure apperception' as non-empirical self-consciousness entails the 'representation I am', i.e., is conscious of its own existence? This is not a linguistic lapse since in the *Refutation of Idealism* Kant declares again:

Of course, the representation I am, which expresses the consciousness that can accompany all thinking, is that which immediately includes the existence of a subject in itself, but not yet any cognition of it, thus not empirical cognition, i.e., experience.

(*KrV*, B 277)

And in the Preface to the second edition of the *KrV*, he even speaks of «the intellectual consciousness of my existence, in the representation I am» (B XL, note). Also, in the *Paralogisms* (A) he asserts: «the supposed Cartesian inference cogito, ergo sum is in fact tautological, since the cogito (sum cogitans) immediately asserts the actuality» (*KrV*, A 355, translation amended).

In all of these citations Kant implicitly claims that by way of conceptual analysis and independently of intuition it is possible to show that the thinking *I* of transcendental apperception is conscious of its own existence as expressed through the proposition 'that I am'. This is not what one should expect him to say. For a good deal of his critique of metaphysics hinges on the principle that «in the mere concept of a thing no characteristic of its existence can be encountered at all» (*KrV*, A 225 B 272) because «every existential proposition is synthetic» (*KrV*, A 598 B 626). For this reason, Descartes' *primo cognitio* 'I think, therefore I am' or 'I think, I am' is synthetic because the analysis of the concept or proposition 'I think' does not provide knowledge about the *I*'s existence. But the *cogito, ergo sum* is not synthetic *a priori*. The proposition 'I think' is rather empirical as Kant himself says it: «The "I think" is [...] an empirical proposition, and contains within itself the proposition "I exist."» (*KrV*, B 422 n.)<sup>2</sup> It is only as an empirical proposition that the 'I think' entails existence analytically which can be found out by conceptual analysis: I perceive myself in inner sense as a thinking being (*KrV*, B 428), which gives rise to the proposition 'I exist thinking'. As such «that

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, though, the empirical or phenomenal self-knowledge is not possible independently of the transcendental *I*'s cognitive activity. Cf. D. HEIDEMANN, *Innerer und äußerer Sinn. Kants Konstitutionstheorie empirischen Selbstbewusstseins*, in *Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung. Akten des IX. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses Berlin 2000*, Bd. 2, hrsg. von V. Gerhardt, R.-P. Horstmann und R. Schuhmacher, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 2001, pp. 305-313.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *KrV*, B 428: «The proposition "I think," or "I exist thinking," is an empirical proposition».

proposition is empirical, and contains the determinability of my existence merely in regard to my representations in time» (*KrV* B 420). Therefore, I perceive my existence in inner sense when I think. This kind of self-knowledge as self-perception is always *material*, not formal, since it takes place in inner sense and is temporal. Notwithstanding its empirical and material character, the proposition 'I exist thinking' is analytic because for all 'thinking' *Is* it is the case that if they are thinking in terms of being cognitively active they must exist. For the transcendental apperception this is not the case because it is formal and does not proceed in time. It is the incompatibility of the existence-claim with respect to the transcendental apperception that Kant was not fully aware of, and that, as it seems to me, Luca Forgione in his enlightening and thoughtful book on *Kant and the problem of self-knowledge* did finally not come to terms with either.



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