

The Transcendental Unity of Apperception and Christian Apophaticism

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Abstract

This study provides an original theological interpretation of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) Transcendental Unity of Apperception in light of Nicholas of Cusa's (1401–1464) apophaticism. The study will show that Kant's Transcendental Unity contains a thoroughly anti-theological premise. This is namely that our own 'I think' grounds the distinction between the transcendent (that which we think but don't know) and immanent (that which we know). This premise is then contrasted with Cusa's conception whereby the distinction is grounded in the transcendent itself. Whilst for Kant our thought itself produces the distinction between 'thinking' (*Denken*) and 'knowing' (*Erkennen*), for Cusa the distinction between 'knowing that' (*quia est*), and 'knowing what' (*quid est*) is produced by God himself.

Keywords

Apophaticism, Kant, Nicholas of Cusa, Transcendence, Transcendental Unity of Apperception

This study explores the relationship between the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and the apophatic theology of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). Despite the commonplace parallels between the two philosophers, their intellectual distance will be firmly established here. This will be achieved by an original exploration of Kant's 'Transcendental Unity of Apperception' (henceforth UoA). It will be demonstrated that, in virtue of the UoA, our own 'I think' provides the possibility for 'thinking' what we don't know, whereas in Cusa's apophaticism, 'that which we think but don't know' itself provides this possibility, that is, via its self-revelation. In other words, Kant's distinction between 'thinking' (*Denken*) and 'knowing' (*Erkennen*) is generated by the spontaneous act of thought itself, while Cusa's analogous distinction between 'knowing that' (*quia est*) and 'knowing what' (*quid est*) is a distinction produced by a transcendent God alone.

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Although the disparity between Kantianism and the dogmatic claims of theology is well known,¹ this paper will establish the disparity on a new, much deeper level—the level of Kant’s own ‘deep seated reflection,’ the Transcendental Unity of Apperception. The latter is at the heart of the ‘Transcendental Deduction’ and possibly of the entire *Critique of Pure Reason*.² It is precisely because of its tortuous complexity that the UoA has until now eluded any serious theological assessment. As a by-product of such an assessment, the commonplace assumption that Kant was a successor of Cusa is seriously questioned.³

To grasp the significance of the argument presented here, we will first recall the major theological approaches to Kant’s work. The second section will then present Kant’s UoA as the origin of our ability to think the unknowable. The final section will show how the UoA is fundamentally incompatible with Cusa’s apophatic theology.

Recent Approaches to Kant’s Philosophy of Religion

There is an obvious mandate for theological engagement with a figure who, along with Plato and Aristotle, is universally classed as one of the greatest Western philosophers.

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- 1 The contradictions between Kant and Christian theology have been most famously established in recent years by Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: OUP, 2000). Plantinga rejects Kant’s claim that our concepts apply only to phenomena and not to transcendent noumena. In other words, Plantinga’s critique rejects both the noumena and the notion of a ding-an-sich. In Plantinga’s reading, ‘[Kant] couldn’t so much as think about such a being as the Christian God, infinite and transcendent as he is supposed to be. That is because our all-too-human concepts could not apply to such a [noumenal] being; our concepts can apply only to finite beings’ (x). The problem with this idea, Plantinga explains, is that ‘We do have at least some grasp of the properties of being infinite, transcendent, and ultimate (else we shouldn’t be able to understand the sentence or grasp the proposition it expresses)’ (6). Plantinga repeats these criticisms in more recent work (2015). However, as the ensuing discussion will demonstrate, Plantinga has not fully understood Kant’s position here. For Kant we can indeed *think* of God, for he is an idea of pure reason, whereas only true knowledge (*Erkenntniss*) of God is beyond our capacity.
 - 2 It was Dieter Henrich who first described Kant’s transcendental deduction in this way: ‘The Transcendental Deduction of the Categories is the very heart of the *Critique of Pure Reason* . . . Whoever understands these pages possess a key to the understanding and evaluation of the entire work.’ Dieter Henrich, ‘The Proof-Structure of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction’ *The Review of Metaphysics: A Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1969), 650–59(1969: 640).
 - 3 This assumption is found as early as Richard Falckenberg’s *Grundzüge der Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lehre vom Erkennen* (Breslau: Koebner, 1880). We even find the following claim in Joseph Koch’s *Die Ars Coniecturalis des Nikolaus von Kues* (Cologne: Westdeutscher, 1956): ‘The theory of knowledge developed in *De Coniecturis* exhibits an astonishing kinship with the *Critique’s* moving from the unordered sensory-impressions all the way to the unknowable God, by way of the understanding and reason. The Cusan concept of enfolding becomes, with Kant, the a priori. The distinction between understanding as the faculty of concepts and reason as the faculty of Ideas is found in both [Cusa and Kant]’ (47–48). For further discussion of these trends see: Jasper Hopkins, ‘Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464): First Modern Philosopher?’ *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26 (2002).

This seems a fair assessment when one considers the ground-breaking intellectual and historical repercussions of Kant's so called 'Copernican revolution.' We need only recall the storm of reactions to his writings throughout the 19th century, reactions which shook the intellectual climate of Germany and of all Europe. One might mention the subsequent 'completion' of Kant's project in the hands of G.W.F. Hegel, which would trigger unprecedented world-wide political shockwaves (Marxism, Leninism). This significance is put into perspective in Adrian Moore's comprehensive study on modern metaphysics. Moore opens his chapter on Kant with the following:

At this point in the narrative something extraordinary happens. What has gone before and what will come after are both largely to be understood in terms of what occurs here. Like the central node in a figure 'X', this point can be seen as a singularity that draws together the various strands above it and issues in those below it [. . .] There would never be a great philosopher after this point who was not a post-Kantian philosopher.⁴

It is for this reason that Kant will continue to draw the attention of philosophers and theologians alike, a fact confirmed by continental philosophy's latest intellectual trend: 'Object-Oriented Ontology.'⁵ Part of this pervasive influence is surely Kant's highly sophisticated and terminologically precise epistemology which resulted in the systematic dismantling of traditional metaphysical arguments.

According to Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the 'all-destroying' Kant had finally done away with metaphysics and thus with dogmatic theology and its claims.⁶ This was, of course, not Kant's own intention. Already in the preface to the first *Critique* Kant clarified his desire to limit reason precisely in order to make room for faith.⁷ Indeed, Kant's intellectual humility may seem attractive to theologians who wish to limit speculative thought but allow for purely practical access to the divine. It is this practical

4 Moore, Adrian, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 107.

5 As the founder of the movement, Graham Harman claims to take Kant's transcendental idealism one step further in suggesting that not only are things in themselves inaccessible, but that 'objects never make full contact with each other any more than they do with the human mind.' The example is often given of a flame burning a piece of cotton—here the cotton is interacting only with the flame's ability to burn, whilst the flame is interacting only with the cotton's flammability. Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2018), 12.

6 Mendelssohn, Moses, *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe* vol. 3.2 (Berlin: Akademie, 1929), 3.

7 'I cannot even *assume God, freedom, and immortality*, [as I must] for the sake of the necessary practical use of my reason, if I do not at the same time *deprive* speculative reason of its pretensions to transcendent insight. For in order to reach God, freedom and immortality, speculative reason must use principles that in fact extend merely to objects of possible experience; and when these principles are nonetheless applied to something that cannot be an object of experience, they actually do always transform it into an appearance, and thus they declare all *practical expansion* of reason to be impossible. I therefore had to annul *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), Bxxx. 'Ich kann also *Gott, Freiheit und Unsterblichkeit* zum Behuf des notwendigen praktischen Gebrauchs meiner

postulate which Kant, in the final analysis, confesses as God. In this light, attempts have been made since the 1970s to rehabilitate Kant's theological value, and soon enough a Kant who affirms classical theism appeared. Allen Wood's monograph defended the existence of God from practical reason, making particular use of Kant's famous *reductio ad absurdum*, the 'absurd' in this case being the absence of a moral law:

Suppose I deny either the existence of God or of a future life. Now if I deny either of these, I cannot conceive the highest good as possible of attainment. But if I am to obey the moral law, then I must pursue the highest good. Thus the moral law requires me to pursue an end which I cannot conceive possible of attainment. Therefore, the moral law is 'false' and I am under no obligation to obey it.⁸

Wood's defence of moral faith soon led to a series of 'theological Kants' throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A clear watershed occurred in 2006 with *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*,⁹ where increased attention to otherwise obscured texts, such as *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, provided new results. Here a distinction was discerned between the traditional readings of Kant's philosophy of religion and 'theologically affirmative' readings. The former understands Kant to 'undermine in a fundamental way all conceivable theological efforts to stake a reasonable claim regarding the nature of God and of God's relationship to the world.'¹⁰ Affirmative readings, on the other hand, 'typically hold that Kant's philosophy provides a rationale for God-talk, God-thought, and even God-experience.'¹¹ Greater interest in 'affirmative' readings led to Firestone and Jacob's *In Defence of Kant's Religion*, which defended a 'portrait of Kant as one who believes in a unified human nature, a divine-human archetype of perfect humanity, and even something like a Church under God and this archetype.'¹²

With respect to apophatic theology in particular, a striking example of an 'affirmative' reading is found in David Goodin's recent paper. Goodin bases his reading on the following passage from the *Critique*:

Vernunft nicht einmal *annehmen*, wenn ich nicht der spekulativen Vernunft zugleich ihre Anmaßung überschwänglicher Einsichten *benehme*, weil sie sich, um zu diesen zu gelangen, solcher Grundsätze bedienen muss, die, indem sie in der Tat bloß auf Gegenstände möglicher Erfahrung reichen, wenn sie gleichwohl auf das angewandt werden, was nicht ein Gegenstand der Erfahrung sein kann, wirklich dieses jederzeit in Erscheinung verwandeln, und so alle *praktische Erweiterung* des reinen Vernunft für unmöglich erklären. Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen.' Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956), Bxxx.

8 Wood, Allen W., *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 26.

9 Chris L. Firestone and S.R. Palmquist eds, *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

10 Chris L. Firestone and S.R. Palmquist, 'Editors' Introduction' in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* eds. C.L. Firestone and S.R. Palmquist (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1-39 (1).

11 *Ibid.*, 3.

12 Chris L. Firestone, Nathan A. Jacobs, and James H. Joiner, 'Introduction' in *Kant and the Question of Theology* eds Chris L. Firestone et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 1-11 (4).

Transcendental theology, in spite of all its insufficiency, still has an important negative use. For it is a constant censure (*Zensur*) of our reason when this reason deals merely with pure ideas—which permit none but a transcendental standard precisely because they are ideas.¹³

Goodin takes passages such as these as evidence of Kant's cooperation with apophatic theology, which 'attempts greater inclusivity by finding words and expressions appropriate to the divine as well as by offering a way to give a methodological nod to the impossibility of this task.'¹⁴ Goodin also reminds us that Kant was always open to divine revelation as a *possibility* which reason had no power to deny. We read for example in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*:

Concerning a scripture which in terms of its practical content contains nothing but divine things, no one can dispute the possibility that it may presumably (namely in regard to what is historical in it) also be regarded actually as divine revelation.¹⁵

Alongside this negating power of 'Transcendental theology' (the negation of both proof and disproof of God), Goodin points to Kant's doctrine of the sublime as a 'pre-rational kind of knowing, an intuitive pure knowing,'¹⁶ and presents it as 'the first opening to a source of revelation outside the constraints of strict empiricism.'¹⁷ The author goes so far as to conclude that '[Kant's] epistemology was open to the possibility of divine revelation outside sensory perception and synthetic *a priori* judgements.'¹⁸

Such accounts, however, seem to turn a blind eye to Kant's thoroughly non-dogmatic and purely moral faith, which simply contradicts the very content of the revelation in question. Indeed, for Kant, although we may not know God, 'such super-sensible ideas . . . nonetheless are significant for establishing the rational procedures guiding our investigations and setting the stage for the practical application of free action in the world.'¹⁹ This regulative (as opposed to constitutive) approach, coupled with the moral imperative, however, excludes the experiential and dogmatic communications of God. It is a well-known tenet of Kant's philosophy that 'practical reason provides the strictures within which all doctrines must be held and through which they must be understood.'²⁰ Such a practical limitation condemns as redundant all theoretical and religious

13 'Die transzendente Theologie bleibt demnach, aller ihrer Unzulänglichkeit ungeachtet, dennoch von wichtigem negativen Gebrauche, und ist eine beständige Zensur unserer Vernunft, wenn sie bloß mit reinen Ideen zu tun hat, die eben darum kein anderes, als transzendentes Richtmaß zulassen.' Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A640/B668 (translation amended).

14 David Goodin, 'Orthodox Theology and Empirical Science: Kant as a Bridge to the Apophatic Revelation of the Orthodox East' *Icoana Credintei: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Scientific Research* 7 (2018), 67–80 (74).

15 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009), 146.

16 Goodin, 'Orthodox Theology and Empirical Science', 70.

17 *Ibid.*, 71.

18 *Ibid.*, 79.

19 Firestone, 'Introduction', 6.

20 *Ibid.*, 7.

speculation on divine matters. Although defenders of the ‘theologically affirmative’ reading point to areas in the Kantian corpus outside the first *Critique* which seem more sympathetic to dogmatics, it is clear that Kant, in fact, maintains his retreat to the practical in later works.

For instance, according to *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, it seems that intellectual assent to doctrine (understood specifically as Christian doctrine) is worthless and even undesirable as compared to the moral law:

Apart from a good way of life, anything further which the human being supposes that he can do to become pleasing to God is a mere religious delusion and a pseudo service of God . . . Yet if the Church were perhaps to proclaim such a mystery as revealed, still the opinion that having faith in this revelation, as sacred history relates it to us, and confessing it (whether inwardly or outwardly), is intrinsically something by which we make ourselves pleasing to God is a dangerous religious delusion.²¹

Note that the ‘good way of life’ is later defined more precisely as a ‘compliance with the moral laws to be carried out in the world.’²² For this reason, the activity of divine grace is totally limited to practical and moral imperatives, thus excluding sacramental theology:

The persuasion that one can distinguish effects of grace from those of nature (of virtue), or perhaps even produce them in oneself, is fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*); for neither can we recognize a suprasensible object in anything in experience, still less have influence on it to draw it down to us, even if in the mind there sometimes occur movements that work toward what is moral, movements which we cannot explain and about which we are compelled to admit our ignorance: ‘The wind bloweth whither it listeth, but thou knowest not whence it cometh.’²³

Similarly, there is no explicit rejection of the critical philosophy in Kant’s later lectures. Concerning the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, for example, it is clear that Kant was ‘supplementing rather than contradicting what is said in the first *Critique*.’²⁴ Here, as in the *Critique*, God is merely a regulative principle: ‘Human reason has need of an idea of highest perfection, to serve it as a standard according to which it can make determinations.’²⁵ Ultimately, it is the moral imperative alone which necessitates such regulative principles:

21 Kant, *Religion*, 189.

22 Ibid., 189.

23 Ibid., 193. Kant is referencing John’s Gospel: ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit’ (John 3:8).

24 Allen W. Wood, ‘Translator’s Introduction’ in Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* trans. Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 9–20 (13).

25 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* trans. Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 21.

Human virtue is always imperfect. For this reason, we must have a standard, in order to see how far this imperfection falls short of the highest degree of virtue. It is the same with vice. We leave out of the idea of vice everything which could limit the degree of vice. In morality it is necessary to represent the laws in their moral perfection and purity.²⁶

The most energetic *theological* rejection of this moralist approach is found in early 20th-century Russia, amongst the likes of Pavel Florensky (1882–1937),²⁷ Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944),²⁸ and Vladimir Ern (1882–1917).²⁹ This theologically motivated and highly polemical anti-Kantian sentiment is most acutely summarized by Aleksei Losev (1893–1988):

If rationalism is the philosophy of an imprisoned captivity (where there is no light, air, or life), and positivism is the philosophy of nihilism, then Kantian doctrine is the philosophy of the self-divinised man [*chelovekobozhestvo*], where God has long ago been crucified, and man has replaced him with his own self and, as a god, deduces and creates from himself all being. Historians of philosophy are correct when they say that Kant is the great synthesis of two basic directions of all previous philosophy, rationalism and positivism. Why, of course! Kant's philosophy is the synthesis of self-imprisonment and nihilism, a synthesis founded on the human 'I,' which transformed all real being and life into nothing, and enclosed itself in the prison of its own hallucinations. Quite a synthesis indeed!³⁰

Although these theological dismissals are certainly based on quite rash dogmatic assertions (lacking a serious engagement with the *Critique*), the authors were not entirely misguided in wanting to distance Kant from Christian thought. Recent voices in the Kantian world have also shown that the closer one looks into the *Critique*, the more it should be seen as opposed to apophatic theology.

26 Ibid., 22.

27 'The immediate givenness of all three kinds of intuition (objective, subjective, and subjective-objective) does not give certitude. This is a radical condemnation of all philosophical dogmatic systems. And we do not exclude Kant's system, for which sensuousness and reason with all its functions are simple givens.' Florensky, Pavel, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 25. On Florensky and Kant see: Frank Haney, 'Pavel Florenskij und Kant: eine wichtige Seite der russischen Kant-Rezeption' *Kant-Studien* 92 (2001), 81–103.

28 'In a time of decaying dogmatic self-consciousness, when religion is most frequently reduced to ethics, merely tinged with pietistic "sufferings", it is particularly important to set out the ontological and cosmological side of Christianity, which is partly revealed in the philosophy of economy. But this is entirely impossible using the means of contemporary Kantianized and metaphysically emptied theology.' Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 37.

29 Ern's views caught public attention after his 1914 lecture 'From Kant to Krupp' which portrayed the arms dealer Friedrich Krupp AG as a successor of Kant and the political offspring of his epistemology. Vladimir Ern, 'Ot Kanta k Kruppu' in *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Pravda, 1991), 308–18.

30 Aleksei Losev, *Vesch i Imia in Bytie Imia Kosmos* (Moscow: Mysl', 1993), 802–72 (860).

A recent example of such distancing is an essay by the North American Kant scholar Nathan Jacobs. According to Jacobs, Kant has a completely different model for thinking about divine revelation than that of apophatic theology. In Jacob's words: 'Kant evidently wants to leave open the ontic window to the possibility of revelation, while shutting the epistemic window to its recognition. Yet, if revelation is what these Eastern Christians describe, then this cannot be done. By leaving open the ontic window, Kant must leave open the epistemic window as well.'³¹ Kant's closure of the 'epistemic window' proceeds, in part, from the following conviction in the Dialectic: 'The transcendental idea of a necessary all-sufficient original being is so overwhelmingly great, so sublimely high above every-thing empirical, which is at all times conditioned, that . . . one can never even produce enough material in experience to fill such a concept.'³² This passage shows that revelation, in Kant's system, is an empirical experience. Our a priori concept of the divine is thus formed by what the Eastern fathers call *epinoia*. That is 'a mode of concept-forming about things inaccessible via *noesis*.'³³ *Noesis*, on the other hand, is understood as 'the direct apprehension of form [which] constitutes empirical knowledge.'³⁴ According to Jacobs:

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- 31 Nathan A. Jacobs, 'Kant and the Problem of Divine Revelation: An Assessment and Reply in Light of the Eastern Church Fathers' in *Kant and the Question of Theology* ed. Christ L. Firestone et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 159–80 (159).
- 32 'Die transzendente Idee von einem notwendigen allgenugsamen Urwesen ist so überschwänglich groß, so hoch über alles Empirische, das jederzeit bedingt ist, erhaben, dass man . . . niemals Stoff genug in der Erfahrung aufreiben kann, um einen solchen Begriff zu füllen.' Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A621/B649.
- 33 Jacobs, 'Kant and the Problem of Divine Revelation', 166. Jacobs explains *epinoia* thus: 'Perceived objects consist of more than just forms. There is, for example, the enduring subject that sits beneath these forms as well as the substratum of prime matter in which these forms come to be. When thinking on such things, the mind finds itself at a loss; it gropes for something in its catalogue of forms on which to lay hold but comes up empty. Hence, it must rely on comparisons. For example, prime matter, being a substratum of pure potential with no properties of its own, is like a shapeless bit of fabric that receives shape from objects around which it is draped. Yet, it is unlike fabric insofar as fabric has properties such as colour and density, whereas prime matter, being pure potential, has no innate properties of its own' (166). This sort of reasoning or *epinoia*, is found for example in the Transcendental Dialectic: 'Although reason in its merely speculative use is far from sufficient for achieving this great aim—viz., arriving at the existence of a highest being—it still has one great benefit. For in case the cognition of this being can be obtained from somewhere else, reason in its speculative use is able to correct this cognition; to make it harmonize with itself and with any intelligible aim; and to purify it of anything that might go against the concept of an original being, and purify it of any admixture of empirical limitations.' Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A639/B667–A640/B668.
- 34 Jacobs, 'Kant and the Problem of Divine Revelation', 166. As Jacobs explains: 'Forms, or universals, are singular properties that can reside in multiple subjects; hence the red in the ball is also in the car, the shirt, and so on. For this reason, the redness of an object can also take up residence in the mind in the act of perception' (166).

Kant's account of revelation locates it in the relationship between *noesis* and *epinoia*, to employ patristic verbiage. That is to say, we form an a priori concept of the divine by employing *epinoia*, and this concept serves as the litmus test for every purported revelation, which Kant locates in *noesis*. . . the Eastern fathers do not locate revelation in either *epinoia* or *noesis*. Instead, they more often link revelation with the human person's ontological participation in God.³⁵

In this respect, Kant's epistemology which forbids trans-empirical knowledge is incompatible with the claim that 'human persons, as *nous*-bearing animals, are able to partake of the divine nature and thereby participate in divine knowledge that is otherwise beyond the limits of our rational faculties.'³⁶ The following exploration of the UoA will offer further support to Jacobs' position. It will show *why* Kant limited knowledge (including knowledge of God) to the cooperation of *epinoia* and *noesis*—namely, because the 'I think' of the UoA produces the distinction of what can only be thought (that which is to be revealed, first possessed in *epinoia*) and what is known (that is properly determinatively cognised via *noesis*). The fact that it is precisely the UoA which makes this distinction, and not the unknowable itself, makes our access to the later solely epistemological. This excludes the ontological-participatory state of 'being bounded' with God. We thus discover a deeper (and as yet unaccounted for) departure from Christian theology at the very heart of the first *Critique*.

Kant's Unity of Apperception as 'Thought' but not 'Known'

The past 30 years have seen a revival of interest in the UoA and its role in the Transcendental Deduction.³⁷ The ensuing discussion will draw heavily on this literature, but will not provide a comprehensive account of the Deduction. Nor will debates on the interpretation of the Deduction be recalled in any detail, as one critic remarks: 'There is now so much commentary responding to commentary, that there is insufficient direct engagement with Kant's text and issues' (Westphal 2021: 2). An outline, according to the text of the B edition, is sufficient for our purposes—namely, to uncover the Deduction's anti-theological nature.

35 Ibid., 169.

36 Ibid., 178.

37 Robert Howell, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction: An Analysis of Main Themes in his Critical Philosophy* (London: Kluwer Academic, 1992). Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction: An Analytical-Historical Commentary* (Oxford: OUP, 2015). Dennis Schulting, *Kant's Deduction for Apperception: An Essay on the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). Alison Laywine, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction: A Cosmology of Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2020). Kenneth R. Westphal, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories: Critical Re-Examination, Elucidation and Corroboration* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021). Despite its age, the three-volume study by Herman Jean de Vleeschauwer remains the single most comprehensive account of the Deduction: Herman Jean de Vleeschauwer, *La Dédution Transcendentale dans l'Œuvre de Kant* 3 vols. (Antwerp: Martinus Nijhof, 1934).

Kant himself testifies to the depth and significance of the Deduction, or his ‘deep-seated reflection’ (Axvi). As we read in the preface to the first edition:

I am acquainted with no investigations more important for getting to the bottom of that faculty we call the understanding, and at the same time for the determination of the rules and boundaries of its use, than those I have undertaken in the second chapter of the *Transcendental Analytic*, under the title *Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding*; they are also the investigations that have cost me the most, but I hope not unrewarded, effort.³⁸

Kant’s Deduction is supposed to determine the ‘possibility or impossibility of a metaphysics as such.’³⁹ The Deduction, as it turns out, eventually proves the *impossibility* of metaphysics traditionally conceived, as we have no real *knowledge* of things in themselves, the objects of metaphysics. The Deduction grounds this claim by ‘deducing’ that necessary a priori concepts must apply to sense-data in order to have any knowledge at all, suggesting that these concepts cannot be applied beyond the sense-data. These are the concepts which are ‘marked out for pure a priori employment, in complete independence of all experience.’⁴⁰ As Lawrence Kaye explains: ‘The hard problem of the TD is actually to show that the categories are justifiably applicable to the external world. . . . Kant does this by deducing (arguing) that the categories are both necessary unifiers of consciousness and they are the rules, i.e., the conditions that constitute representation.’⁴¹ *We need* a priori categories to have a single consciousness (for our representations to be *our* representations) and to have representations in general.

As will become clearer in the analyses, this single consciousness or ‘Unity of Apperception’ is the condition for the distinction between things for us and things in themselves, between phenomena and noumena. This is because the UoA is the condition for our use of concepts—we can only use concepts if we are a unified consciousness which synthesizes representations under these concepts—and concepts are the condition for the phenomena/noumena distinction as phenomena depend on the concepts to be organized *as phenomena*:

Phenomena/Noumena Distinction

(Dependent on)

Use of Concepts

38 ‘Ich kenne keine Untersuchungen, die zur Ergründung des Vermögens, welche wir Verstand nennen, und zugleich zur Bestimmung der Regeln und Grenzen seines Gebrauchs, wichtiger wären, als die, welche ich in dem zweiten Hauptstück der *transcendentalen Analytik*, unter dem Titel der *Deduktion der reinen Verstandesbegriffe*, angestellt habe; auch haben sie mir die meiste, aber, wie ich hoffe, nicht unvergoltene Mühe gekostet.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Axvi.

39 ‘Der Möglichkeit oder Unmöglichkeit einer Metaphysik überhaupt’ (Axii).

40 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A85/B118.

41 Lawrence J. Kaye, *Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories: Unity, Representation, and Apperception* (New York: Lexington, 2015), 183.

(Dependent on)

The Unity of Apperception

It thus comes as no surprise that the very first example of the phenomenal/noumenal distinction is found in the TD, namely the UoA itself.

Kant's Deduction set out to prove our knowledge of the a priori concepts or categories: 'The task of the legitimating "deduction" of our a priori concepts is to explain how we know the kinds of things Kant thinks we all know a priori.'⁴² Kant has already shown, via the Aristotelian approach of the Metaphysical Deduction, that these a priori categories correspond to the 12 forms of judgement. But this is not enough to prove their necessity, as there are other conditions needed to confirm these categories to be categories of thought. We must, for example, think *of something*, as present to us according to the Aesthetics' forms of sensibility, i.e., as an appearance. But this is still not enough for knowledge of particular objects since we could just as well experience chaotic uncoordinated appearances. As Kant explains:

While it is evident that objects of sensible intuition must conform to the formal conditions of sensibility lying a priori in the mind, since otherwise they would not be objects for us, it is not so easy to see the inference whereby they must in addition conform to the conditions that the understanding requires for the synthetic unity of thought . . . appearances might be of such a character that the understanding would not find them to conform at all to the conditions of its unity.⁴³

By unity, Kant means the unity brought about by a priori concepts, or rules of thought. What we have then, in Allison's words, is 'the worry that the deliverances of sensibility might not correspond to the a priori rules of thought.'⁴⁴ The Deduction is Kant's solution to this problem.

It is commonly held that the Deduction proceeds in two parts. The first (§15–§21) deals with the necessity of the a priori categories regarding objects of sensible intuition in general, whilst the second (§22–§27) deals specifically with *human* sensibility and its objects. As Allison clarifies, the distinction here turns on the 'epistemic functions' of the categories: 'Their function in the first part is to serve as rules for the thought of an object of sensible intuition in general, that is, as discursive rules for judgement . . . By contrast the aim of the second part of the Deduction is to establish the applicability of the categories to whatever is given under the conditions of human sensibility [as found in the Aesthetic].'⁴⁵

42 Barry Stroud, 'Kant's Transcendental Deduction' in *Seeing, Knowing, Understanding: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 151–66 (152).

43 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A90/B123.

44 Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 2014), 160.

45 *Ibid.*, 162. Both Henrich and Laywine draw the same distinction between the two halves of the Deduction: 'The first step plays out from §15 to §21; the second step, from §22 to §26.'

Kant opens the Deduction by introducing the notion of synthesis. ‘All combination . . . is an operation of the understanding upon which we might confer the general appellation “synthesis” in order to indicate thereby that we can represent nothing as combined in the object without having previously combined it ourselves. . . .’⁴⁶ There is an important distinction to be made here between a mere combination (*Verbindung*), and synthesis. As Laywine explains: ‘To speak of combination as such is to insist only on the fact that the relevant operation is carried out by the understanding. To speak of synthesis, however, is to indicate that combination is an act of the understanding that I have carried out on my own behalf.’⁴⁷ Kant, in this way, also introduces the notion of spontaneity, or ‘self-activity’ (*Selbsttätigkeit*).⁴⁸ The latter is the prerequisite for synthesis, and therefore, a prerequisite for the entire UoA.

Having introduced our synthetic activity, Kant in §16 defends two key claims. Firstly: ‘The “I think” must be able to accompany all my representations (*Vorstellungen*); for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all.’⁴⁹ Kant here seems to be claiming, in line with the A Deduction, that the same consciousness must accompany various representations otherwise we would not be able to form concepts—to form the concept ‘red’ it must be the same consciousness which is present at the various representations of redness. In this way, without an identical consciousness

I take the ‘*scopos*’ of the whole first step to be thinking as such—as it discloses itself to itself . . . I take the ‘*scopos*’ of the second step of the B-Deduction—and indeed that of the Deduction as a whole—to be cosmology . . . It is purely formal—a cosmology of experience, as I call it. By this I mean an argument that treats experience as a (sensible) world, i.e., as a unified whole of appearances (with appropriate qualifications to guard against antinomies), and that tries to establish its conditions of possibility by showing that its unity comes from laws legislated to appearances by the understanding through its categories.’ Laywine, *Kant’s Transcendental Deduction*, 86-87.

- 46 ‘So ist alle Verbindung . . . eine Verstandeshandlung, die wir mit der allgemeinen Benennung *Synthesis* belegen würden, um dadurch zugleich bemerklich zu machen, dass wir uns nichts als im Objekt verbunden vorstellen können, ohne es vorher selbst verbunden zu haben.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B130.
- 47 Laywine, *Kant’s Transcendental Deduction*, 97–98.
- 48 Spontaneity has already been recognised by Kant as a general characteristic of the understanding, ‘bringing forth representations from itself’ (A51/B75). Kant’s notion of spontaneity is elucidated by Marco Scarbi as our absolute freedom of thought: ‘The spontaneity of the understanding can act independently of sensibility, and its action is thinking. The faculty of the understanding as pure spontaneity is, therefore, according to Kant, thought. The subject as a thinker is thus wholly spontaneous and is not bound to any object of experience. Moreover, from the transcendental standpoint, the subject does not refer to an object of sensible experience, but to an object in general, and in so doing is not constrained by the external world, but is spontaneous in exercising its activity. Neither concepts nor principles are constraints for the understanding because they are constitutive of its nature. Spontaneity of the understanding, therefore, both as a thinking activity and as a transcendental structure, is absolutely and completely spontaneous.’ Marco Scarbi, *Kant on Spontaneity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 48.
- 49 ‘Das “Ich denke” muss all meine Vorstellungen begleiten können; denn sonst würde etwas in mir vorgestellt werden, was gar nicht gedacht werden könnte.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B131–B132.

throughout time, or the 'I think' as Kant calls it, I would not be able to use concepts and thus would not be able to think at all.⁵⁰ Most importantly, because our concepts (or use of categories) are dependent on this 'I think,' then the phenomena/noumena distinction itself, (since phenomena are ordered by concepts), is also dependent on the 'I think.'

Secondly, the 'I think' requires a *numerical identity*. For my representations to be coherent there must be an identical 'I think' who can accompany them: 'The manifold presentations given in a certain intuition would not one and all be *my* presentations, if they did not one and all belong to one self-consciousness.'⁵¹ The 'I think' as a *formal* constant remains in all thoughts. This 'I think' is 'one and the same in all consciousness [and] cannot be accompanied by any further presentation.'⁵² It is simply 'the presentation to myself of the fact that I am thinking something.'⁵³ It is not strictly *necessary* that the 'I think' accompanies every representation, but necessarily *possible* that it do so: 'Though denying that every cognitively significant representation must be apperceived, [Kant] maintains that it must be *apperceivable*.'⁵⁴

This unity of consciousness is *synthesis*: 'In order for the I that thinks *a* to be able to identify with the I that thinks *b* it must first combine them in a single consciousness, which means that a capacity to synthesize its distinct representations is a necessary condition of its becoming conscious of its identity.'⁵⁵ Not only synthesis but consciousness of this synthesis is also required. Kant claims explicitly that 'the identity of apperception . . . is possible only through the *consciousness of this synthesis*.'⁵⁶ In other words, the I's consciousness of its identity requires a consciousness of its act of synthesis. As Allison explains: 'The consciousness of the identity of the I that thinks *a* with the I that thinks *b* could only consist in the consciousness of the identity of its action in thinking together *a* and *b* as its representations.'⁵⁷ It is at this point that Kant makes an important distinction between empirical consciousness, which is 'in itself dispersed' (B133), and the act whereby the 'I think' accompanies a presentation. This distinction will return in various forms throughout the Deduction.

Kant's argument introduces a unique reciprocity. 'It is a condition of the possibility of the self-ascription of distinct thoughts that they can be brought into a synthetic unity; just as it is a condition of such synthetic unity that the thoughts be ascribable to a single

50 Kaye, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories*, 24–25.

51 'Denn die mannigfaltigen Vorstellungen, die in einer gewissen Anschauung gegeben werden, würden nicht insgesamt meine Vorstellungen sein, wenn sie nicht insgesamt zu einem Selbstbewusstsein zugehörten.' Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B132.

52 'Die Vorstellung "Ich denke" . . . die alle andere muss begleiten können, und in allem Bewusstsein ein und dasselbe ist, [und] von keiner weiter begleitet werden kann.' *Ibid.*, B132.

53 Douglas Burnham, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 88.

54 Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, 336.

55 *Ibid.*, 339.

56 'Diese durchgängige Identität der Apperception eines in der Anschauung gegebenen Mannigfaltigen, enthält eine Synthesis der Vorstellungen, und ist nur durch das Bewusstsein dieser Synthesis möglich.' Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B133.

57 Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Deduction*, 340.

thinking subject.’⁵⁸ In other words, in order for there to be a unified ‘I think’ there must be a synthesis of the manifold, whilst equally, in order for there to be such a synthesis there must be a single self-identical ‘I think’ which synthesizes.

Kant now (§17) shows the significance of these findings with respect to the Aesthetic: ‘Just as the basic principle of the possibility of intuition, in so far as it is *given in sensibility*, was that it was subject to space and time, so here the basic principle of all intuition, insofar as it is *combined for the understanding*, is that it is subject to the original synthetic unity of apperception.’⁵⁹ Since intuition is never only given in sensibility, but in order to avoid ‘blindness’ (recall the maxim from A51/B75: ‘Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’) is combined by the understanding, the UoA can be considered the pivot between intuition and understanding, upon which the entire *Critique* depends. The UoA is the principle of all intuition, precisely because intuition intuits ‘objects,’ which are defined by Kant as ‘that in whose concept the manifold of a given intuition is *united*.’⁶⁰ Understanding objectivity according to this definition is key to understanding the Deduction. Kant gives the example of drawing a line:

In order to cognize something or other—e.g., a line—in space, I must draw it; and hence I must bring about synthetically a determinate combination of the given manifold, so that the unity of this act is at the same time the unity of consciousness (in the concept of a line), and so that an object (a determinate space) is thereby first cognized.⁶¹

For this reason, Kant can claim that every intuition must be subject to the UoA, ‘in order to *become an object for me*.’⁶²

The following sections §18 and §19 make an important distinction between the unity of the UoA and empirical/subjective unity. This can be read as a development of the previous distinction between the act of apperception (UoA), and ‘empirical consciousness,’ but now with reference to predication. Predication, via the ‘little relational word *is*’ (B141), receives its objective necessity from the UoA, thus distinguishing it from subjective unity: ‘This word [is] indicates the reference of the presentations to original apperception and its *necessary unity*.’⁶³ Kant explains the consequences of this claim:

Only through this [reference to original apperception and its necessary unity] does this relation [among presentations] become a *judgement*, i.e., a relation that is valid objectively and can be

58 Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, 116.

59 Burnham, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 90.

60 ‘Objekt aber ist das, in dessen Begriff das Mannigfaltige einer gegebenen Anschauung vereinigt ist.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B137.

61 ‘Um aber irgendetwas im Raume zu erkennen, z.B. eine Linie, muss ich sie ziehen und also eine bestimmte Verbindung des gegebenen Mannigfaltigen synthetisch zu Stande bringen, so dass die Einheit dieser Handlung zugleich die Einheit des Bewusstseins (im Begriffe einer Linie) ist, und dadurch allererst ein Objekt (ein bestimmter Raum) erkannt wird.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B137–38.

62 ‘Um *für mich* Objekt zu werden.’ Ibid., B138.

63 ‘Denn dieses bezeichnet die Beziehung derselben auf die ursprüngliche Apperzeption und die notwendige Einheit derselben.’ Ibid., B142.

distinguished adequately from a relation of the same presentations that would have only subjective validity—e.g., a relation according to laws of association.⁶⁴

Objective validity of judgements, in other words, is granted because both sides of the judgement are synthesized by the UoA. Judgement is thus ‘the act of understanding whereby the manifold of given presentations (whether intuitions or concepts) are brought under one apperception.’⁶⁵ It is for this reason that §20 concludes: ‘The manifold in a given intuition is subject necessarily to the categories.’⁶⁶ As Burnham summarizes: ‘All manifolds, insofar as they can be apprehended as one in consciousness, are determined with regard to one of the logical functions of judgement. The categories are just these functions of judgement considered as determining pure intuition.’⁶⁷

In the second part of the Deduction, Kant expands on these ideas, but specifically for *human* knowledge via intuition. For instance, the previous distinction between the UoA and ‘subjective unity’ can now be mapped on to the distinction in §22 between thinking (*denken*) and cognition (*erkennen*). Thinking involves mere concepts while cognition involves two components: ‘First the concept (the category), through which an object as such is thought; and second, the intuition, through which the object is given.’⁶⁸ For this reason, Kant holds that ‘the categories cannot be used for cognising things except insofar as these things are taken as *objects of possible experience*.’⁶⁹ Section §23 continues in the same vein: ‘Solely *our* sensible and empirical intuition can provide them [i.e. the categories] with meaning and significance.’⁷⁰ Importantly, it is now not only sensible intuition as such, but *our* sensible intuition which provides meaning and significance for concepts.

Kant returns to the main argument of the Deduction in §24, applying the UoA specifically to sensible intuition: ‘The understanding . . . can think the synthetic unity of the apperception of the manifold of a priori *sensible intuition*—this unity being the condition

64 ‘Dadurch allein wird aus diesem Verhältnisse ein *Urteil*, d.i. ein Verhältnis, das Objektiv gültig ist und sich von dem Verhältnis eben derselben Vorstellungen, worin bloß subjektive Gültigkeit wäre, z.B. nach Gesetzen der Assoziation, hinreichend unterscheidet.’ *Ibid.*, B142–43.

65 ‘Diejenige Handlung des Verstandes . . ., durch die das Mannigfaltige gegebener Vorstellungen (sie mögen Anschauungen oder Begriffe sein) unter eine Apperzeption überhaupt gebracht wird.’ *Ibid.*, B143.

66 ‘Also steht das Mannigfaltige in einer gegebenen Anschauung notwendig unter Kategorien.’ *Ibid.*, B143.

67 Burnham, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 93.

68 ‘Zum Erkenntnis gehören nämlich zwei Stücke: erstlich der Begriff, dadurch überhaupt ein Gegenstand gedacht wird (die Kategorie), und zweitens die Anschauung, dadurch er gegeben wird.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B146.

69 ‘Folglich haben die Kategorien keinen anderen Gebrauch zum Erkenntnis der Dinge, als nur so fern diese als *Gegenstände möglicher Erfahrung* angenommen werden. *Ibid.*, B147–48.

70 ‘*Unsere* sinnliche und empirische Anschauung kann ihnen allein Sinn und Bedeutung verschaffen.’ *Ibid.*, B149.

to which all objects of our (i.e. human) intuition must necessarily be subject.⁷¹ Kant specifies that a figurative synthesis, is a ‘synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuition,’ as opposed to a synthesis of a ‘manifold of intuition as such.’⁷² The figurative synthesis is the transcendental synthesis of imagination. The latter being ‘the power of presenting an object in intuition even *without the object’s being present*.’⁷³ This imagination is present in both the purely intellectual synthesis and the newly introduced figurative synthesis: ‘The imagination is in part that which is determined in synthesis, and in part what is “determinative”—it is a bridge so to speak between the understanding and sensibility.’⁷⁴ In this way Kant can claim that the figurative synthesis falls under the same conditions as the intellectual—namely the imagination.

Having shown that sensible ‘figurative’ synthesis is subordinate to the synthesis ‘as such,’ Kant returns to the question of how we have knowledge of this synthesizing—our very knowledge of the UoA. For Kant, all self-knowledge proceeds via inner sense. The latter being a mere presentation of a manifold without synthesis: ‘My self-awareness must proceed through the detour, so to speak, of inner sense and the form of time.’⁷⁵ This means we have no true or direct knowledge of the UoA or the ‘I think.’ The only knowledge we have of the later is *that* it is. In the act of synthesis, Kant writes, ‘I am not conscious of myself as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but am conscious only *that* I am.’⁷⁶ We thus have only an *indeterminate* sort of knowledge of the ‘I think.’ For determinate knowledge of the self, intuition as inner sense is required: ‘In order to cognize myself, I not only require the consciousness of myself or the fact that I think myself, but require also an intuition of the manifold in me whereby I determine this thought.’⁷⁷ As Burnham concludes: ‘Kant accordingly can distinguish between consciousness of oneself as mere intelligence or power of combination, on the one hand, and cognition of oneself.’⁷⁸ It is thus Kant’s Deduction which not only produces the distinction of merely thinkable things-in-themselves/noumena and the knowable things-for-us/phenomena, but is the first and primary example of this distinction.

71 ‘So kann der Verstand . . . synthetische Einheit der Apperzeption des Mannigfaltigen der sinnlichen Anschauung a priori denken, als die Bedingung, unter welcher alle Gegenstände unserer (der menschlichen) Anschauung notwendigerweise stehen müssen.’ *Ibid.*, B150.

72 ‘Diese Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen der sinnlichen Anschauung, die a priori möglich und notwendig ist, kann figürlich (*synthesis speciosa*) genannt werden zum Unterschiede von derjenigen, welche in Ansehung der Mannigfaltigen einer Anschauung überhaupt in der bloßen Kategorie gedacht würde und Verstandesverbindung (*synthesis intellectualis*) heißt.’ *Ibid.*, B151.

73 ‘*Einbildungskraft* ist das Vermögen einen Gegenstand auch ohne dessen Gegenwart in der Anschauung vorzustellen.’ *Ibid.*, B151.

74 Burnham, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 96.

75 *Ibid.*, 97.

76 ‘Dagegen bin ich mir meiner selbst in der transzendentalen Synthesis des Mannigfaltigen der Vorstellungen überhaupt, mithin in der synthetischen ursprünglichen Einheit der Apperzeption, bewusst, nicht wie ich mir erscheine, noch wie ich an mir selbst bin, sondern nur dass ich bin.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B157.

77 ‘So bedarf ich auch zum Erkenntniße meiner selbst außer dem Bewusstsein, oder außer dem, dass ich mich denke, noch einer Art8schauunf,’ des Mannigfaltigen in mir, wodurch ich diesen Gedanken bestimme.’ *Ibid.*, B158.

78 Burnham, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 98.

Kant finally completes his Deduction by showing that the forms of space and time, as intuitions in their own right, require synthesis: ‘Space and time are presented a priori not merely as *forms* of sensible intuition, but as themselves *intuitions* (containing a manifold), and hence are presented with the determination of the *unity* of this manifold in them.’⁷⁹ We must possess a priori this synthetic unity of the intuitions of space and time. Kant is thus merely reinforcing the need for synthesis and thus the need for the application of the categories.

Our own ‘spontaneity’ produces the distinction between the merely ‘thinkable’ (the pure ‘I think’) and the knowable/cognizable (empirical self), in other words, our ‘spontaneity’ has allowed us to ‘think what we don’t know.’⁸⁰ Thanks to this insight, Kant can now distinguish noumena from phenomena, and is thus justified in being able to think and discuss a whole host of cognitive apparati which we don’t strictly know (noumena, transcendental objects, transcendental ideas). This is why we can also think *transcendentally* the activities of the understanding, which we don’t strictly know as such. It is in this sense that the UoA is the condition for all Kant’s epistemology, as we read in the Deduction: ‘there must be a condition that precedes all experience and makes the latter itself possible, which should make such a transcendental presupposition valid.’⁸¹

Kant has now successfully drawn the famous distinction, which Gardener defines succinctly: ‘[That] which Kant requires in order to avoid contradiction as regards his negative claims regarding things in themselves is [a distinction] between (i) robust positive contentful cognition—“thick sense-making”, and (ii) the mere empty “thinking” (without knowing) of entities—“thin sense-making”.’⁸² Most importantly, this distinction is produced by, proceeds from and is grounded in the ‘I think,’ and not the purely ‘thinkable’ as such, the transcendent itself.

But the fact that we only *indeterminately* think this ‘I think,’ this pure formal transcendental act, surely means that we can’t determine it *as* actually producing this distinction. Why does the spontaneity on which the apperception is built have to come from cognition? Kant leaves this question open. It is quite evident that Kant leaves open a loose end here, and he himself admits: ‘The understanding by itself cognizes (*erkennt*) nothing whatsoever, but only combines and orders the material for cognition [i.e. is spontaneous] . . . But why our understanding has this peculiarity, that it a priori brings about

79 ‘Aber Raum und Zeit sind nicht bloß als Formen der sinnlichen Anschauung, sondern als Anschauungen selbst (die ein Mannigfaltiges enthalten) also mit der Bestimmung der Einheit dieses Mannigfaltigen in ihnen a priori vorgestellt.’ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B160.

80 We are reminded of the precise function of spontaneity: ‘Unity is never simply discovered in a manifold of intuition. It cannot be discovered, because it is not there. It is always the effect of construing the manifold; construing the manifold is always an exercise of the mind’s spontaneity. Spontaneity is something entirely up to us. As long as we exercise it, there will be some kind of unity in the manifold of intuition.’ Laywine, *Kant’s Transcendental Deduction*, 93.

81 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A107.

82 Sebastian Gardener, ‘Transcendental Idealism at the Limit: On A. W. Moore’s Criticism of Kant’ *Philosophical Topics* 43 (2015), 63–85 (66).

unity of apperception only by means of the categories, and only by just this kind and number of them—for this no further reason can be given.’⁸³ In other words, why it is precisely the understanding and its UoA which are spontaneous, and not some external being or even spontaneity itself, is taken by Kant as a brute fact.

Kant thus has no reason to oppose the claim that perhaps the unknowable itself is the source of pure spontaneity, and has itself provided this possibility to ‘think’ what we can’t strictly know, itself producing the distinction of ‘thinking’ and ‘knowing.’ As we will see, this is the route taken by Cusa’s apophatic theology.

The Unknowable as ‘Thought’ but not ‘Known’ in Nicholas of Cusa

Cusa’s epistemology claims that the distinction between the ‘thought’ and the ‘known’ is not produced by human cognition, by a spontaneous act of synthesis, but by that itself which can be ‘thought but not known.’ It is rightly claimed that the roots of Cusa’s apophaticism are found in Dionysius the Areopagite. For the latter, it is undoubtedly God himself who draws the distinction of the knowable and unknowable. “‘There is one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 8:6) and “one and the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:11) and this is so in the overwhelming indivisibility of that oneness of God within which all things are banded together as one in the possession of a transcendent unity and in the transcendence of their pre-existence.’⁸⁴ It is thus only in virtue of being ‘banded together’ in God that things can ‘possess’ this transcendent unity. It follows, therefore, that only in virtue of our intellect’s being bounded together ontologically with God can we possess knowledge of him.

According to Dionysius, this ontological connection is God’s own self-activity, conditioning our knowledge of him: “‘Difference’ too is ascribed to God since he is providentially available to all things and becomes all things in all (1 Cor. 15:28) for the salvation of them all. Yet at the same time he remains within himself and in *his one unceasing activity* he never abandons his own true identity. With unswerving power, he gives himself outward for the sake of the divinization of those who are returned to him.’⁸⁵ God’s departure from himself (whilst paradoxically remaining one with himself) is that which makes it possible to ‘think’ him, and is thus the origin of the ‘thought’/‘known’ distinction. This is, for the Areopagite, God’s own spontaneous act.

Cusa extends the Dionysian tradition, maintaining that God determines the boundary of the ‘knowable’ and the merely ‘thinkable,’ which like God, is itself ‘unattainable.’ Cusa’s notion of the ‘unattainable’ is inspired by Ephesians 1:21, which teaches that God is ‘above all principality and power and virtue and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.’ To be above every name, for Cusa, means to exist beyond all concepts. God, in this way, eludes the conceptual grasp of human minds. The ‘conceptual,’ in this case, is understood etymologically,

83 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B145–46.

84 Dionysius the Areopagite, *Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 129.

85 *Ibid.*, 116.

deriving from *concipio*—to seize or contain. Cusa explains the transcendence of God thus:

I have ascertained that the ultimate and deepest contemplation of God is boundless, infinite, and in excess of every concept. For, assuredly, everything of which there is a concept is encompassed by [that] concept. But God exceeds all this. For the concept of God is [an absolute] Concept, or an absolute Word, which enfolds within itself everything which can be conceived; but it is not conceivable in anything else.⁸⁶

That which is beyond concepts, which is ‘unknowable,’ ‘incomprehensible’ or ‘unattainable’ is what determines the boundary of the known and the unknown (merely thinkable). As we read in *De Docta Ignorantia*:

The precise truth shines forth incomprehensibly in the darkness of our ignorance. This is the learned ignorance for which we have been searching, and, as we explained, by means of it alone we can draw near the maximum and triune God of infinite goodness, according to the degree of our learning of ignorance, so that with all our strength we may always *praise God for showing Godself to us as incomprehensible*, who is over all things, blessed forever.⁸⁷

Similarly, in *De Visione Dei*, we read the following: ‘The Heavenly Word and Omnipotent Expression [is he] *who alone* can make himself known.’⁸⁸ The distinction of comprehensible and incomprehensible is therefore not a distinction proceeding from our act of knowledge, as it was for Kant, but rather a distinction proceeding from the incomprehensible itself.

Cusa presents the same line of thought in the following passage from *De Docta Ignorantia*: ‘The precise combinations in corporeal things and the *congruent application of known to unknown* so far exceed human reason that Socrates believed he knew nothing

86 ‘Reperi ultimam atque altissimam de deo considerationem esse interminam seu infinitam seu excedentem omnem conceptum. Omne enim cuius conceptus est aliquis, utique in conceptu clauditur. Deus autem id omne excedit. Nam conceptus de deo est conceptus seu verbum absolutum in se omne conceptibile complicans, et hic non est conceptibilis in alio.’ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Possess* in Jasper Hopkins, *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 62–156 (107).

87 ‘Ex quibus concludimus precisionem veritatis in tenebris nostre ignorantie incomprehensibiliter lucere, et hec est illa docta ignorantia quam inquisiuimus per quam tantum ad infinite bonitatis deum maximum vnitrinum secundum gradus doctrine ipsius ignorantie accedere posse explicavimus, ut ipsum ex omni nostro conatu de hoc semper laudare valeamus quod nobis seipsum ostendit incomprehensibilem qui est super omnia in secula benedictus.’ Nicholas of Cusa, ‘On Learned Ignorance’ in *Selected Spiritual Writings* trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist, 1997), 85–206 (127). Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, Book I, 89, in Nicholas of Cusa, *Werke* ed. Paul Wilpert (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967), 2–100 (89).

88 ‘Verbum supernum et sermonem innipotentem, qui solum se ipsum pandere potest.’ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei* in Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and interpretive study of de visione dei* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Arthur J. Banning, 1988), 99–272 (110).

except that he did not know.⁸⁹ We learn here that the very *application* of the known to the unknown, in other words the very distinction of these two categories, which for Kant was produced by the UoA, actually exceeds human reason in Cusa's case, and is in this way a distinction of *divine* reason alone.

Cusa must admit, however, that we do have at least some conception of God, or else we would not be able to ascribe the predicate 'beyond concepts' to God. Cusa explains this pre-supposed positive conception, or more precisely 'thought' of God by referring to our possibility to 'think' an infinite number of possibilities without knowing them. As Hopkins summarizes:

Even though we cannot actually think [more precisely, *know*] an infinite number of possibilities, we can conceive of there being such an infinity (just as we can conceive of there being an infinity of natural numbers). If God is taken to be this infinite number of possibilities, then in some respect we do conceive of [think] Him in conceiving that the possibilities are infinite. That is, although we cannot construct a concept of God, we can state the rule for how it is to be constructed. There is a sense in which we may be said to conceive of God by way of understanding the rule for conceiving of Him.⁹⁰

This ability to 'think of' the infinite can equally be expressed as an awareness of its existence rather than knowledge of its essence, as Cusa writes: 'Anything which does not admit of multitude or magnitude cannot be either conceived or imagined, and no image of it can be fashioned. Hence it cannot be understood precisely. (For every one who understands must behold images.) And so, we apprehend *that* it is, rather than apprehending *what* it is.'⁹¹ This particular relationship of 'knowing *that*,' or merely 'thinking of' but not strictly 'knowing' what is transcendent to us is not only how Cusa speaks of God's transcendence, but defines the entire cosmic order.

More precisely, different spheres of being penetrate higher spheres (unknowable to them) in virtue of the latter's agency in a process of revelation. One critic explains this hierarchical structure as follows: 'Colour does not become visible through itself, but by its sovereign spirit, sight, which colour cannot comprehend because sight lies outside all the boundaries of colour. Yet even sight does not see in and of itself, but the discriminative spirit of reason, which sight does not know, sees in and for it; nor does our intellect understand or live except as the divine Spirit understands and lives within us, though the Spirit remains unbounded by the constraints of our intellect.'⁹² The point to be made here

89 'Precisio vero combinationum in rebus corporalibus, ac adaptatio congrua noti ad ignotum humanam rationem supergreditur: adeo ut socrati visum sit se nihil scire nisi quod ignoraret.' Nicholas of Cusa, 'On Learned Ignorance', 88. Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia*, 4.

90 Jasper Hopkins, 'Introduction' in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 3–44 (24).

91 'Omne autem, quod non cadit sub multitudine nec magnitudine, non potest nec concipi nec imaginari nec de eo phantasma fieri; sic nec praecise intelligi. Oportet enim omnem intelligentem phantasmata speculari. Ideo de his potius "quia est" quam "quid est" attingitur.' Nicholas of Cusa, *De Possesse*, 24.

92 Bond, Hugh Lawrence, 'Translator's Introduction' in Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings* trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist, 1997), 3–84 (42).

concerns the highest form of penetration: that of intellect in the divine Spirit. This ascent is one of unknowing, because ‘both the agent which interpenetrates and works the ascent of the lower level of seeing [here intellect], and the ascent itself exceed each level’s own capacity to grasp.’⁹³ It is clear from this that the higher level invariably ‘works the ascent’ of the lower level.

There are still, however, philosophical problems with this sort of apophaticism. Cusa, in effect, is claiming to represent the unrepresentable. This is a clear contradiction since even the statement ‘God is unknowable’ still presupposes some real knowledge (or representation) of the subject. As one critic reminds us: ‘If God is not p, then God is such that he is not p. This may be less informative than a positive sentence about God but it is representational nonetheless’ (Scott 2016: 35). This problem is known in contemporary philosophy as the ‘representation problem.’ As discussed above, Kant avoided this problem via the distinction of what is ‘thought’ and what is ‘known.’ Nonetheless, such a distinction could still prove problematic. This is because the distinction itself could be seen as being represented or known (as distinctions usually are) which would then assume that what is being distinguished is also known and not just ‘thought.’ There are, however, some novel ways of avoiding the representation problem.

As has recently been suggested, the purpose of apophaticism might be ‘to express an unwillingness to assert a given sentence or class of sentences, rather than to reject the truth of what is said.’⁹⁴ This means that when apophatic thinkers, such as Cusa, deny positive statements about the unknowable, they are not denying their truth value, but rather are just ‘unwilling’ to pronounce them. Michael Scott, in his paper on apophaticism, provides various examples where this might be the case. Scott takes the following from a newspaper headline: ‘Ben Ward is not a black Police Commissioner but a Police Commissioner who is black.’⁹⁵ This is an example of negation which does not negate the *content* or the truth value of the first statement but rather its very *assertion*, it is a metalinguistic negation. In the present case the assertion is denied because of ‘the priority implied by stating these facts [being black and being a Police Commissioner] in a particular order.’⁹⁶ Something similar happens in apophatic statements, as Scott suggests:

An apophatic can use metalinguistic negative sentences about God without thereby representing God as lacking a property and thereby falling foul of the representation problem. Rather, the apophatic is rejecting the appropriateness of sentences that represent God. On this account, what is communicated by ‘God is not being’ is not that it is false that God is being but rather (with a bit of elaboration) ‘It is inappropriate to say that God is being’.⁹⁷

It therefore seems that even if one were to take issue with the ‘knowing’/‘thinking’ distinction, there are still ample philosophical grounds for an apophatic theology.

93 Ibid., 42.

94 Michael Scott and Gabriel Citron, ‘What is Apophaticism? Ways of Talking about an Ineffable God’ *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8 (2016), 23–49 (35–36).

95 Ibid., 36.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., 37.

Conclusion

The above analyses first explored the significance of Kant's philosophy of religion, outlining the history of a spectrum of sympathy with Kant's approach to religion. The spectrum ranged from the more morally inclined theologians who saw in Kant a proof of God's existence from the moral law, to those who place greater emphasis on the problematic dogmatic repercussions of Kant's epistemology. The current paper has provided some further evidence for the latter end of the spectrum through a close consideration of the UoA.

It was shown that Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction is dependent on our concepts which organize the phenomena, and is thus subsequently dependent on the UoA which is the justification for our use of concepts. It is thus no surprise that it is precisely at this point in the critique where the distinction first appears, with the UoA itself understood as noumenal. According to the UoA, the unity of objects requires the unity of their synthesis under concepts by a single thinking subject. This led Kant to define the object as that in the concept of which a manifold is synthesized, thus proving the necessity of his table of categories. The by-product of this proof was a subject who can be 'thought' but not 'known.' This becomes increasingly evident throughout the Deduction, first in the distinction of the 'I think' from the empirical self, and then in the distinction between the 'I think' and the self as intuited through 'inner sense.' Although we intuit the self, our knowledge of the 'I think' is indeterminate: 'I am not conscious of myself as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but am conscious only *that* I am.'⁹⁸

The severe theological implications of the UoA were then exposed, and finally contrasted with the relevant elements of Cusan apophatic theology. The distinction between 'thinking' (knowing *that*) and actually 'knowing' (knowing *what*) proceeds from cognition itself. For Cusa's theology, however, this distinction proceeds from what is merely 'thought' or from God and in this sense is not dependent on our cognition.

These insights have revealed, on a fresh and much deeper level than previously suggested, the severe disparity between the first person singular standpoint of post-Cartesian epistemology and the third-person epistemic approach that formerly prevailed. The present study thus forms a continuation of the recent revival of interest in Erich Przywara's work on Kant. For Przywara, Kant's philosophy is subjectively spontaneous in the above sense: 'Philosophy, understood as the noetics of a cognitive philosophy or a philosophy of mind, is grounded in "pure thought" as an *absolutum*.'⁹⁹ The present analyses have shown that it is precisely in virtue of the UoA, that Kant's philosophy is solely dependent on 'pure thought' and thus receives, on a deeper level than first assumed, Przywara's appellation of a 'fallen philosophy.'¹⁰⁰

It is hoped that the present study has not only brought forth a new impetus for a theological engagement with the Transcendental Deduction, but has also shed some valuable light on the convergence (or, more precisely, lack thereof) between Kant's epistemology and apophatic theology.

98 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B157.

99 Erich Przywara, *Analogue Entis: Metaphysics, Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 405.

100 *Ibid.*, 406.

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