

Kant's Account of Self-Cognition

Introduction:

As humans, we place ourselves at the center of our own worlds. People take in the world around them and interact with objects and others, but they always retain a separate category for themselves in their minds. Every individual is the only one who knows all their own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the world. There is something extremely special about this, and it is why Immanuel Kant comments on the functions of human cognition that lead us to create this distinct mental space. Despite this, though, Kant also believes that people cognize themselves the same way that he believes they cognize objects. In Section 24 of Critique of Pure Reason, Kant states that “through inner sense we intuit ourselves only as we are internally affected by ourselves” (“Critique of Pure Reason”, 259). What exactly does Kant mean by this? At first, it appears that Kant believes that we can only ever gain an understanding of ourselves as we appear to ourselves, which would mean that we could never access anything about ourselves outside of sensory information. Under this interpretation, we could only have the capacity to receive information about ourselves in the same way we do with objects. However, upon closer inspection, Kant asserts that the inner sense is what specifically leads us to this self-object cognition, and elsewhere provides other aspects of self-cognition that show we can gain more awareness about our thoughts. The latter interpretation resolves the unsatisfactory and grim depiction of our self-cognition that Kant appears to present and validates our tendency to give ourselves special status in our minds. I will argue that this interpretation is more accurate to Kant's depiction of self-cognition, and that it provides a deeper understanding of how people gain information about themselves.

In the first section, I will provide background into where the problem of self-cognition comes into play in the Critique of Pure Reason. Kant's characterization of our cognition of objects will be explained in detail to provide a basis for how people cognize themselves. In the second section, I will clarify how the first section applies to the problem taken up in this paper, and further motivate the problems that arise from a limited ability of self-cognition. In the third section, I will show how closer inspection of Kant's reasoning in this section shows that we are only limited in our perception of ourselves through empirical information and not overall. Part of Section 3 of the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals will be used to support this interpretation. In the fourth section, I will present a complication and show how the interpretation that I will defend is more helpful to understanding our self-cognition. Finally, I will conclude the paper and provide final thoughts regarding self-cognition.

Background:

It is essential to understand how Kant characterizes human cognition of objects to understand self-cognition because he believes they work in a similar way. The problem that arises with self-cognition will become clear in the next section. Kant claims that everything that is represented to us is done so through space and time. He says that space provides us the ability to represent objects of experience in our mind as it is "the form of all appearances of outer sense" (KrV, 177). It is an a priori cognition, which means that it exists independent of any experience. One with no experiences in the world still understands space because it is necessary for any cognition to take place. For an object to be perceived by the mind, there must be something in us that allows for that perception. Thus, space exists so our minds can receive experiences and perceptions. It can be understood easier when one abstracts their thoughts to a "pure intuition" (KrV, 177). Take away all thoughts of objects and experiences that exist in the mind, and one is

still left with the understanding that things can exist there and has a sense of nothingness.

Without space, there would be no comprehension of the possibility of experience, which everyone seems to have. Space provides us the ability to comprehend sensible information and place it in our mind, while time is a “necessary representation that grounds all intuitions” (KrV, 178). Kant says that time is a priori because it can never be removed from our minds, much like space. One can add and remove objects, but time always remains (KrV, 179). It is not itself an object, but rather a way that objects can be related to each other. Space provides the room for things to be represented to the mind, while time allows for things to be added and removed from the mind and relate things to each other. Both motion and alteration are essential concepts that are “only possible through and in the representation of time” (KrV, 180). Without the a priori intuition of time, objects would not be able to appear to us as changing or moving. Space and time are both a priori concepts of our intuition that allow all sensible representations to be possible to us. Since they deal with sensibility and are subjective to everyone’s experiences, they “apply to objects only so far as they are considered as appearances, but do not present things in themselves” (KrV, 183). Every object that appears to us does so through our intuitions of space and time. Space and time are functions of our mind, and therefore are not objective realities. Objects exist in the world outside of us, and we can only understand them insofar as they are represented to us through space and time. Therefore, our a priori cognitions cannot give us access to objects as they are in themselves. We can only ever access things as they appear to us.

Focusing the Conversation:

While Kant’s characterization of our cognition of objects may be controversial, it will be taken as given for the purposes of this paper. The concern here is not how we cognize objects, but rather whether our cognition of objects is the same or different to our cognition of ourselves.

The way that we cognize objects under Kant's view is important because he claims that we cognize ourselves in a very similar way. Returning to the quote presented earlier, he asserts that "through inner sense we intuit ourselves only as we are internally affected by ourselves" (KrV, 259). It can now be seen that Kant presents self-cognition through the intuitions of space and time (which make up the inner sense). With this approach, humans cognize themselves through their subjective experience, which is the same way that objects are cognized. However, this does not seem to tell the whole story. Humans generally have a very intimate association with their own thoughts beyond mere perceptions of space and time. There is a general awareness of something, which Kant calls the ego, that allows for these thoughts to take place ("Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," 56). However, Kant's presentation of self-cognition through the inner sense never allows people to cognize the ego, and from that the self, as it is beyond perceptions of space and time. An inability to understand the ego that lies at the basis of everyone seems that it would present two issues. Self-cognition on the same level of cognition of objects, which I will call self-object cognition, does not match up with the universal experience of thought beyond perceptions, and it is discomforting, as people place themselves in their own category in their mind. It is reasonable to think that Kant also experiences this. Therefore, it is doubtful that his reasoning would place people's cognition of themselves on the same level that they cognize objects. He presents the "I that intuits itself" and the "I as intelligence and thinking subject" (KrV, 258-259) which shows that he believes there is more than simple self-object cognition. The way that Kant separates these I's and how they can be used to develop a more complex self-cognition is shown below.

Argument for Thesis:

The issue of self-object cognition needs to be resolved. It is not adequate for Kant to claim that people can only cognize themselves in the same way they cognize objects because it runs counter to general experiences. To resolve the issue, it is important to grasp Kant's vocabulary. The distinction between inner sense and apperception is the most important to locate the more fruitful interpretation of self-cognition. On first presentation, it is easy to confuse inner sense as the same as apperception, but Kant believes that there is a big difference between the two (KrV, 257). Inner sense refers to the previously established concepts of space and time. The inner sense does not contain any appearances of objects itself, but rather consists of the forms that allow for sensibility to be interpreted as appearances (KrV, 258). When we intuit ourselves through the inner sense, we perceive ourselves in space and through time. Thus, Kant is correct in saying that through the inner sense we can only perceive ourselves in the same way that we perceive objects. The inner sense only presents experiences through space and time, so through it one cannot understand any aspects of cognition or thought that lie beyond their sensible attributes. Kant shows this aspect of self-cognition through the imagination. He states that "we cannot think of a line without drawing it in thought, we cannot think of a circle without describing it" (KrV, 258). In the inner sense, we imagine ourselves as we are in the world. The inner sense does not have the capacity to depict things like thoughts or feelings that are pivotal to one's experience because they are not sensibly represented. Thoughts and feelings do not exist in the world, they come from within the mind. It is known that these things exist within us, but another aspect of cognition must be used to gain a deeper understanding about their nature.

To go beyond representations of the self through space and time, Kant distinguishes between the "I that I think" and the "I that intuits itself" (KrV, 258). While inner sense refers to the I that intuits, apperception refers to the I that I think. Apperception is the a priori self-

consciousness that is contained within all of us (KrV, 246). It is a priori because there must be an I think that allows for the grounding of thoughts. Without a thinker, the thoughts would not exist. Where inner sense allows for sensible information to be received, apperception allows us to take up thoughts based on these perceptions as a “thinking, not an intuiting” (KrV, 259). We are aware of our consciousness, which adds a layer to our self-cognition beyond the sensible information that we get through the inner sense. It can now be seen with apperception that one’s self-cognition differs from their cognition of objects. The reason that Kant focuses on inner sense when he says that “we intuit ourselves only as we are internally affected by ourselves” (KrV, 259) is because the inner sense gives us more empirical information about ourselves than apperception. However, this is no reason to think that apperception is not helpful. Apperception is the initial consciousness that makes all concepts and intuitions possible. It allows sensory information to be placed into categories and gives an identity to the action of this placement (KrV, 233). Without apperception, one could still cognize sensible information as it moves through space and time but would not be able to identify anything as an object. It does not provide much information about the self, but rather provides the space for all understanding to take place through the awareness of a thinking subject.

Kant reinforces the difference between the thinking subject and the subject of thought in the Groundwork. He distinguishes between the world of sense and the world of understanding, which track with inner sense and apperception respectively. Kant states that one thinks of oneself in the world of sense when they regard themselves as “mere perception and receptivity to sensations” (Gw, 56). The world of sense is the standpoint that one takes when they use inner sense to cognize themselves. In the world of sense, we only exist as objects of experience, and therefore cannot gather any information outside of what comes to us through sensibility. The

world of understanding is also introduced, in which we “must necessarily assume something else lying at [our] basis” (Gw, 56). The world of understanding provides the ability to form ideas through a combination of sensory information. This is like the functions of apperception in that it grounds sensibility through combining it into thoughts. The two different worlds are important because they show that people can move between different standpoints in their cognition of themselves. Kant states that “a rational being must regard himself as intelligence” (Gw, 57). In other words, we must transfer ourselves to the world of understanding to recognize ourselves as a thinking subject. The world of sense allows us to receive information about ourselves but does not do much a priori. The world of understanding allows one to reflect on oneself as a thinking subject and place oneself under ideas of freedom and morality (Gw, 58). The world of understanding is what allows people to ground themselves in reason. Reason is what ultimately distinguishes people from objects and is also why cognition of the self must be more complex than cognition of objects.

Counter Argument:

At this point, the reader might notice that even with the division between inner sense and apperception, there has not been much discussion about the ego, which is ultimately the self. The reader may find a complication here because it seemed as if the problem to the self-object cognition would result in an understanding and cognition of the ego. It must be admitted that even under a fuller interpretation of Kant’s account of self-cognition, one can never fully cognize or understand what lies at the base of the self, or the ego. However, this complication is not detrimental to the argument that has been put forth. Kant states very explicitly that when we place ourselves in the world of understanding, we become aware of our ego, of which we have “no further cognizance” (Gw, 56). The interpretation that has been presented merely aims to

show that we comprehend ourselves in a deeper way than we cognize objects. While we cannot access what we are in ourselves, we still know that the self exists. There are no other objects that we can comprehend in the world of understanding the same way that we can comprehend ourselves within it. Our abilities of reason allow us to gain a deeper understanding of our thoughts and understanding of the world. Therefore, our self-cognition lies somewhere between our cognition of objects and the ego that lies at the basis of ourselves.

Conclusion:

In this paper, the self-object cognition problem was resolved. The initial problem appeared to be that Kant claims in the Critique of Pure Reason that we cognize ourselves in the same way we cognize objects. Through a careful distinction between the inner sense and apperception, it was found that we have an ability to cognize ourselves beyond the extent that we do of objects. One may not be able to fully cognize what lies at the basis of oneself, but the human tendency to understand the self as separate from the objects of its cognition is validated and it is known that self-cognition goes further than a simple cognition equal to that of objects.

Works Cited

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