Kant on Unconscious Mental Activity

Tom Rockmore

It is tempting but false to think that the unconscious was discovered at a given point in time when we suddenly became conscious of it. It is more accurate to say that long before that point, whenever it may be, it was not absent but present. Though we were unconscious of the unconscious as it were, it, however, understood in different ways, played a variable role in a large number of theories. Long before Freud focused on the unconscious in a way that has never ceased to capture the attention of the public, others, including philosophers, were interested directly and indirectly in the unconscious.1

Kant, who thinks of human beings as rational, emphasizes conscious activity. He believes that the Enlightenment culminates in the challenge to dare to know (sapere aude) in thinking independently of authority. He further believes that a moral individual must act autonomously, that is, according to principles that must without exception govern the actions of all rational beings. These are forms of conscious activity. But what if Kant’s theory of knowledge were based on unconscious activity? This paper will examine Kant’s epistemology in arguing that at the heart of the critical philosophy we find a conception of unconscious activity pointing to an anti-Cartesian theory of the subject as a conscious but also an unconscious actor.

I. Kant’s Theory on Consciousness, Self-consciousness and the Unconscious

We can begin to discuss the unconscious in the critical philosophy by addressing the triple distinction, familiar in the post-Freudian period, between consciousness, self-consciousness and the unconscious. It is well

---

known that the Greeks were concerned with the problem of non-being (to mei on). In the Sophist, Plato responds to Parmenides’ claim that non-being is impossible in claiming that, since in a sense it is, hence it is possible. Non-being, which is not intelligible by itself, points toward and is only intelligible on the basis of being. For this reason, Hegel begins both his Logics with being and not with non-being. In the same way, self-consciousness and consciousness point toward the unconscious.

Kant discusses consciousness and self-consciousness in the transcendental deduction. He explicitly claims, against Hume’s bundle theory of perception, that the unity of consciousness is a necessary condition for cognition.\(^2\) He also mentions “self-consciousness” several times. Though he has the term, it is unclear that he in fact has a theory of self-consciousness,\(^3\) which arguably only comes into the German idealist tradition with the self-described orthodox Kantian, Fichte. Kant famously claims to know Plato better than he knows himself.\(^4\) To Kant’s dismay, while Kant was still alive Fichte made the same claim about Kant. Though Kant rejected Fichte’s position as impossible, Fichte interpreted this claim as meaning that he was even more Kantian than Kant.

In the deduction of the categories, Kant twice mentions in rapid succession that “a synthesis of the representations” is possible only “through consciousness of this synthesis (“consciousness of their synthesis”).\(^5\) Yet this point is dubious. Since consciousness is a condition of self-consciousness, there must be consciousness of a perceptual object, which is the result of the synthesis of representations, prior to and as a condition of self-consciousness. In that case, self-consciousness cannot be a condition of synthesizing representations. Indeed, Kant seems ambivalent about this claim. For he earlier indicates that combination of the manifold takes place whether or not we are conscious of it.\(^6\)

Some observers believe Kant’s theory of consciousness implies or even entails a theory of self-consciousness.\(^7\) We detect what might be

\(^2\) See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 133, p. 247.
\(^4\) See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 370, p. 396.
\(^6\) See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 130, p. 245.
called a minimal theory of self-consciousness, with arguably Cartesian resonances, in the “Refutation of idealism.” The aim of this argument is to resolve the scandal of the existence of the external world, the same problem, which G. E. Moore later raised against idealism in general. Kant seems to be claiming that, if we are aware of ourselves as having ideas, there must be a mind-independent external world, which causes this awareness, and which, hence, exists. The presupposition is that, as Sartre later says, all consciousness is consciousness of something. Hence, if there is consciousness, then it is caused by the world, which must exist.

The view Kant outlines in the “Refutation of idealism” is consistent with Kant’s generally anti-Cartesian conception of the subject. Descartes argues that the existence of the subject, which cannot be denied, is the unshakeable basis for a theory of knowledge constructed on that foundation. According to Descartes’ the subject is self-conscious, thus certain of its existence, prior to and apart from knowing anything else. Descartes’ claim for the cogito, namely, that if the subject thinks, it must exist, is based on self-consciousness, not on consciousness of anything different from the self. Since Descartes understands self-consciousness as immediate, not as mediated by consciousness of anything different from the self, he does not argue that the subject is conscious of the world, hence conscious of itself as conscious of the world. Kant’s restatement of the Cartesian argument is intended to prove the existence of the external world without claiming anything about the subject beyond self-consciousness. Since he denies intellectual intuition, he further denies direct access to oneself. Hence, he cannot argue from his own existence to the existence of the world. Rather, he presupposes his own existence in arguing for a proof of the existence of the external world. This can be formulated as the claim that I am not conscious of myself as I am but only that I am. In other words: Descartes argues from self-consciousness to knowledge of the world, but Kant argues from self-consciousness to knowledge of the existence of the world.

The Kantian argument from self-consciousness to the world is weaker than the Cartesian model. On the one hand, the basic distinction between

---

9 See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 157, p. 259.
appearance and reality, or phenomenon and noumenon, puts knowledge of the mind-independent world as it is beyond appearance out of conceptual bounds. According to Kant, all knowledge begins with experience, but there is and cannot be experience of the noumenon. Since the latter can only be thought without contradiction, but cannot be given in experience, it is arguably inconsistent even to assert its existence. If that is correct, the effort to demonstrate the existence of the external world arguably either fails or at least requires further argument to buttress its claims.

On the other hand, Kant, unlike Descartes, does not address the problem of skepticism with respect to the contents of consciousness, or ideas. It is unnecessary to invoke the fiction of an evil genius to imagine that the subject is aware of nothing more than what it itself dreams up. In this case as well, the proof of the external world would fail. Further, it is arguably problematic in the critical philosophy even to speak of self-consciousness, which implies an immediate grasp of oneself. Since Kant denies intellectual intuition, he concedes no more than that we can represent ourselves but not that we can grasp ourselves as we are. Yet it seems odd to attribute self-consciousness to a subject, which is a mere appearance, and which is conscious of no more than the appearance of the external world.

II. On Kant’s Theory of the Unconscious

In studying Kant’s view of the unconscious, we will be testing the limits of what, from a Kantian or indeed any other perspective, can be known. In an obvious sense, what is unconscious cannot become unconscious without in the process being destroyed.

A possible difficulty in attributing a theory of the unconscious to Kant derives from his attitude toward psychology. In both the A and B editions Kant analyzes four paralogisms, which derive from a rational psychology, and which can only falsely be taken for a science of pure reason. Kant’s attitude toward psychology is ambivalent. He is suspicious of the possibility of a future science of empirical psychology on at least two grounds: as concerns what later came at the time of the early Husserl to be known as psychologism, and with respect to the possibility, consistent with his denial that the subject has privileged access to itself, for instance

10 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 566, p. 535.
in a grasp of what we might call unconscious activity. His rejection of what later, through the intervention of the early Husserl, came to be called psychologism explains his repeated references to Locke’s so-called physiology as well as the assertion that the latter “sensitized the concepts of the understanding.” Today we would say that, from Kant’s perspective, Locke substitutes a psychological for a rational account of knowledge. Yet Kant’s critical philosophy sketches a faculty psychology on the transcendental plane. His transcendental theory of the mind includes at a minimum a view of the subject as the transcendental unity of apperception, of categories or rules of synthesis, and of the synthetic activity through which perceptions as well as objects of experience and knowledge are constructed.

Kant further argues at several places that the unconscious activity of the mind lies beyond the limits of what can be known. In a passage in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* that sounds as if it came from later psychoanalytic discussion, Kant straightforwardly claims that our secret motivations are beyond our knowledge. According to Kant, “we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives; for when moral worth is at issue, what counts is not actions, which one sees, but those inner principles of actions that one does not see…” This passage, which conflicts with Kant’s theory of autonomy as the criterion of morality, suggests it is never possible to determine if a given act is moral. In the schematism chapter in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he suggests in famously describing the activity through which the schemata are produced as “a hidden art in the depth of man’s soul” that it is simply situated beyond the reach of human knowledge. These and other passages suggest Kant has at least a minimal theory of the unconscious, but not that he has a conception of the unconscious in the more extended modern sense.

The modern science of empirical psychology did not yet exist when Kant was writing and Kant was skeptical that it could even be formulated. Kant, who thinks chemistry, which is empirical, is, for that reason, merely

---

12 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, e.g. A ix, p. 100.
13 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 327, p. 372.
an art, further believes that psychology is even less scientific. In the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* he states that the “the empirical doctrine of the soul ... must remain even further removed than chemistry from the rank of what may be called a natural science proper.” Paradoxically, though Kant contends we cannot have knowledge in the full sense of the term of the unconscious, he also thinks, like Leibniz, that human beings know themselves through pure apperception, that there are representations of which I am not conscious.

Kant’s view of the unconscious appears inconsistent. He seems to hold that, since there cannot be a science of psychology, or at least not a science in the full sense of the term, and there cannot be experience of unconscious activity, we also cannot do without it as an explanatory concept. This suggests that, if we cannot study the unconscious empirically, the correct way to study the unconscious activity of the mind is transcendentally, that is indirectly through analysis of the so-called necessary conditions of knowledge.

### III. The Unconscious and Causal Theory of Explanation

Observers sometimes note Kant’s use of the unconscious. Heidegger famously emphasizes the role of the imagination in the first *Critique*. In a study of the *Critique of Judgment*, following Heidegger, Makkreel claims that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant left much of the work of judgment to the unconscious imagination. Kant’s attitude toward the unconscious is similar to his conception of the thing in itself. Kant, who claims the thing in itself can neither be experienced nor known, appeals to it constantly. He takes a similar attitude toward the unconscious. Though he seems to be clear that it cannot be grasped, he appeals to it in numerous contexts. His approach to the unconscious makes

---

18 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 574, p. 540.
use of variations on the theme of a causal form of explanation. This means that the unconscious functions in the critical philosophy in causal situations, more precisely that in its causal role the unconscious is a necessary condition of consciousness, which is its effect.

In the critical philosophy, Kant stresses the central function and limits of our possible knowledge of the understanding. In a famous passage, Kant further sets limits to the reach of the understanding itself:

We have now not only traveled through the land of pure understanding, and carefully inspected each part of it, but we have also surveyed it, and determined the place for each thing in it. This land, however, is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end.22

Two points follow immediately. First, Kant thinks that the understanding has natural limits, which cannot be transgressed without falling into illusions. In other words, there are limits to what we can legitimately claim to know. This suggestion is consistent with a main thrust of the critical philosophy, which consists in pointing to the limits of reason. Second, Kant links the proper use of the understanding to thinking about its sources since otherwise one cannot determine the boundaries of its legitimate use.23 The link between the sources of the understanding and its so-called legitimate use remains obscure, difficult to grasp. Kant reminds us that one can only legitimately use principles empirically, that is, with respect to appearances that are objects of possible experience. Yet there are different ways to explain possible experience, such as on the basis of conscious or unconscious activity.

Kant’s effort to grasp the function of the understanding can be grasped through his relation to Newton and Leibniz. Kant is a critical philosopher, and philosophy differs from natural science. Yet there is an analogy between his theory of knowledge, and the general scientific approach to the explanation of phenomena through causal explanation. Kant, who came to philosophy from natural science, was also interested in the history and philosophy of science. Copernicus advances a descriptive approach to astronomy, which is superseded in Newton’s dynamic approach. New-

---

ton relies on gravitation, the invisible force whose origin he cannot explain, and whose existence can only be inferred, to account for the motions of the heavenly bodies. The aims are clearly different since Newton is concerned with knowledge of nature, and Kant is concerned with knowledge of human nature. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, since Kant is a Newtonian, the approach each employs is similar. Kant, like Newton, appeals to the unconscious, whose origin he also cannot explain, and whose existence he only infers, to explain the possibility of knowledge in general.

Both appeal to the unconscious as an explanatory principle in a causal framework. For Newton and for Kant, causal explanation, which employs a kinetic approach, supersedes the merely descriptive approach of Copernican astronomy. Kant’s claim that through the discovery of gravitation Newton proved what Copernicus only conjectured supposes the validity of causal explanation within the framework of Newtonian mechanics. Causality is a historical variable, which goes back to the beginnings of Western philosophy in ancient Greece. Ancient Greek cosmology records early efforts to explain the origin or functioning of the cosmos by invoking explanatory factors such as water (Thales), reason (Anaxagoras) and so on. Aristotle thinks that causes are beginnings and that scientific knowledge requires knowledge of causes.

Kant rejects the familiar view that our knowledge must conform to objects. In his Copernican revolution, he stresses that objects must conform to our cognition. In his approach to explanation of knowledge, Kant works out a theory of unconscious activity based i. a. on his reading of Descartes, Leibniz, Baumgarten and others as well. From Descartes, he takes the general dualistic approach to mind and body while rejecting the idea that a soul is a substance. It follows that the soul is not part of the causal framework, and, since it is not causally determined, wholly free. In our post-Freudian world and post-Marxian world, this view of the subject might now appear simplistic, but it is central to the critical philosophy.

In Kant’s account of knowledge from the perspective of the subject, the subject is the source of spontaneous but unconscious activity, which is a necessary condition for experience and knowledge of objects. There

---

24 See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B xxii, p. 113.
is a difference between activity, which is spontaneous and activity, which is unconscious. All unconscious activity is presumably spontaneous, but only some spontaneous activity is unconscious. Reflexes take place in spontaneous but not necessarily unconscious ways. A cough or a sneeze is spontaneous but neither is unconscious. Consciousness and unconsciousness are antithetical. Activity that is a condition for consciousness cannot itself be conscious.

Leibniz and Baumgarten both influence Kant’s view of the activity of the understanding as spontaneous and unconscious. Kant criticizes Leibniz on a number of grounds, such as his relational view of space, his view of pre-established harmony, for conflating phenomena and noumena, and so on. Yet he is indebted to Leibniz for the conception of the subject as the source of spontaneous but also unconscious activity.

Spontaneity or spontaneous activity is theoretical, not practical. Theoretical activity is analogous to free practical activity, which is assumed as the basis of the claim to determine oneself to act according to a moral rule. Leibniz’s influence on Kant’s conception of spontaneity is sometimes discussed. In the *Monadologie*, Leibniz claims, apparently for the first time, that a monad, which has no windows, cannot be influenced, hence cannot change because of an external causal influence. In denying external causality, Leibniz opts for the so-called spontaneous activity of simple substances. Baumgarten follows Leibniz on this point in his *Metaphysica*, which Kant used in his lectures over many years. Baumgarten defines spontaneity as the particular activity of the monad as “vis repraesentativa pro positu corporis humani” in contending that cognition is based on it.

Moral autonomy, which is two-fold, includes freedom from external causal determination and freedom to self-legislate, or so-called freedom from and freedom to, the two kinds of freedom famously discussed by

---

27 See, for an account of Kant’s theory of spontaneity, Marco Sgarbi, “The Spontaneity of Mind in Kant’s Transcendental Logic,” in *Fenomenologia e Società*, no. 2, 2009, XXXXII, pp. 19–28. Sgarbi argues very convincingly that the spontaneity of the understanding is Kant’s transcendental condition for all knowledge.


Berlin. Theoretical autonomy is invoked to explain experience and knowledge through “combination of the manifold in general” which is “an act of the spontaneity of the power of representation” ... that takes place “as an action of the understanding, which we would designate with the general title synthesis.”

It is, however, difficult to get clear about how Kant understands theoretical spontaneity, since he describes it as both necessary but also as lying beyond the limits of human cognition. I will come back to this point below.

It is perhaps less well known that Leibniz also influences Kant’s view of spontaneous theoretical activity as unconscious. Descartes advances a theory of knowledge based on consciousness, which excludes the unconscious. According to Descartes, all thought is conscious thought. There is no unconscious thought.

In reacting against Descartes, Leibniz holds that there are some perceptions—he calls them “petites perceptions”—of which we are not conscious. According to Leibniz, the mind contains perceptions, or representations, and appetitions, that is tendencies, inclinations or strivings. Appetition, or the internal principle of activity and change, provide the transition between perceptions. He distinguishes between perception and apperception, which is consciousness of the former, more precisely “consciousness, or the reflective knowledge of this internal state,” which, as he specifies, is “something not given to all souls, nor at all times to a given soul.”

Today we might describe such perceptions as subliminal. Leibniz is clear that an appeal to unconscious perception is central to philosophy of mind. “In short, insensible perceptions have as much use in philosophy of mind [Pneumatique] as corpuscles do in physics; and it is

31 See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 130, p. 245.
equally unreasonable to reject the one as the other under the pretext that they are beyond the reach of the senses.”

Kant closely follows Leibniz in claiming that the mind (Gemüt) acts spontaneously and unconsciously. He depicts the subject as both passive and active, and passivity and activity as both conscious and unconscious. The subject is passive in that it is affected, or acted upon, by the mind independent external world, which lies beyond the possibility of cognition. In Kant’s theory of knowledge the subject passively receives the contents of the sensory manifold, or sensation, which it actively transforms into objects of experience and knowledge. The activity through which the subject constructs cognitive objects is unconscious and spontaneous, hence involuntary, not under the control of the subject.

IV. Spontaneity, Synthesis and the Understanding

Kant, who acknowledges the limits of the understanding, also limits what he can say about it. His theory points to a relation between the unconscious, spontaneity and synthesis in the understanding, a relation, which he infers but cannot claim to know through experience.

At the beginning of the “Transcendental Logic,” he claims cognition arises from intuition and concepts. He defines sensibility as “the receptivity of our mind to receive representations insofar as it is affected in some way” in distinguishing it from the understanding, which he describes as “the faculty for bringing forth representations itself, or the spontaneity of cognition ....” The reception of sensation is passive, not active, and also unconscious. With respect to sensation, the subject is passive and unconscious. We do not perceive that we are affected. Rather we infer that this is necessary as a condition for consciousness and self-consciousness. Knowledge requires both receptivity and spontaneity. Spontaneity combines or synthesizes the manifold in an action of the understanding known as synthesis. This synthesis cannot be given by the objects by is

---

36 See Preface to the New Essays, in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, p. 297.
37 See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 74, p. 193.
38 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 75, p. 193.
39 See Kant Critique of Pure Reason, A 97, p. 228.
40 See Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 130, p. 245.
carried out by the subject itself in what Kant unclearly describes as “an act of its self-activity.”

Spontaneity and synthesis are related, since synthesis occurs spontaneously in the unconscious activity of the subject as a condition of knowledge. Both spontaneity and synthesis remain unclear. The account of spontaneity is further complicated by differences between the deductions advanced in the A and B editions. In the A edition, spontaneity is described in a footnote in which Kant refers to imagination as a necessary ingredient in perception in suggesting that “the senses do not merely afford us impressions but also put them together, and produce images of objects, for which without doubt something more than the receptivity of impressions is required, namely a function of synthesis of them.” This reads in part like a concession to Hume, who features an explanation of causal relations through the spontaneous association by the mind of unassociated sensory perceptions. Kant similarly holds that on the a posteriori level the senses combine contents of mind. His account of the way the mind spontaneously puts together sensations together on the a priori level is more elaborate than Hume’s a posteriori account. For Kant, under the influence of Tetens, spontaneity functions as the “ground of a threefold synthesis” of apprehension of representations as intuition, reproduction in imagination, and recognition in a concept.

Kant further describes synthesis in three numbered sections. In section 1, he stresses that the synthesis of apprehension in intuition is a priori, not empirical, and that, as inner sense, it is limited by time. In the account of synthesis of reproduction in the imagination he brings out that the synthesis of apprehension is combined with the synthesis of reproduction, which he also calls the transcendental faculty of the imagination, since otherwise no whole representations would be possible. This is a version of the important point he urges in the B deduction in insisting against Hume’s bundle theory of the subject that the subject must endure from moment or, as he also says, as “one consciousness.”

In both the A and B deductions Kant curiously insists on consciousness as necessary to show that “that which we think is the very same as

41 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 130, p. 245.
42 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 120, p. 239.
44 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 97, p. 228.
what we thought a moment before” since otherwise, according to Kant, “all reproduction in the series of representations would be in vain.”

Yet it does not follow that, if the subject endures through time, it is also conscious. Kant appears here to conflate the unconscious activity through which the synthesis of reproduction occurs with the problem of conscious memory. In the B deduction, where Kant is moving increasingly from a representational to a constructivist approach to knowledge, he identifies synthesis with the productive imagination in introducing a distinction, in an exceedingly complicated passage, between reproductive imagination, which is subject to empirical laws, such as association and which is similar to Hume’s analysis of causality, and productive imagination, which is spontaneous. In the account of synthesis of recognition in a concept, where Kant distinguishes clearly between appearances or representations of an object, which can be thought of as something in general, he further seems to conflate the necessary unity of the subject, or transcendental unity of apperception, with consciousness of the conditions of knowledge. According to Kant, “this unity of consciousness would be impossible if in the cognition of the manifold the mind could not become conscious of the identity of the function by means of which this manifold is synthetically combined in one cognition.”

There is an equivocation here, since, though it is arguably possible to elucidate the conditions of consciousness of objects of experience and knowledge, we are not and cannot become conscious of what Kant calls “the identity of the function.” Kant writes: “Thus the original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself is at the same time a consciousness of an equally necessary unity of the synthesis of all appearances in accordance with concepts ....” Yet ordinary self-consciousness does not yield this result, which follows, if it follows at all, from a transcendental deduction only.

Kant’s account of synthesis in the B deduction is very similar. Synthesis, which can be either pure or applied, is the “action of putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition.”According to Kant, transcendental logic relies on synthesis as a necessary prerequisite “to bring under concepts not

47 See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 152, p. 257.
the representations but the *pure synthesis* of representations.” In anticipating the later passage on the limit of the understanding, Kant declares that synthesis, which is “blind,” includes in order “the manifold of pure intuition,” then “the synthesis of this manifold by means of the imagination” and finally “the concepts that give this pure synthesis unity....” Absent here is the difficult claim, which is apparently inconsistent with the view that synthetic activity is spontaneous, hence not consciously brought about, that the subject is conscious of this process.

V. Unconscious Activity, Subjective Perception and Objective Knowledge

Knowledge claims are always claims for objective knowledge, hence for knowledge of the real or reality however understood. What one means by “knowledge” and by “real” depends on the particular theory. But in general, cognitive theories must acknowledge the difference between subjectivity and objectivity. This problem is traditionally addressed through adducing a claim for realism. The ancient claim to know the mind-independent world as it is beyond mere appearance, not only that it is, but also as it is, is often called metaphysical realism or sometime Platonic realism. This claim, which goes back in the tradition at least until Parmenides, is often later identified with Platonism. The invention of the modern subject changes the theory of knowledge. But it does not change the commitment to realism as a central element in cognitive claims that remains roughly the same as before after the invention of the modern subject.

The invention of the modern subject does not simplify but rather complicates the epistemological problem in that after this invention, if not before, access to objectivity necessarily runs through subjectivity. The need to approach objectivity through subjectivity introduces a complication in explaining the possibility of knowledge. At stake is a distinction between different levels and types of the general claim to know. Kant, who is aware of this difficulty, responds in introducing a triple distinction between sensation, perception, and experience and knowledge of objects. In the critical philosophy, sensation is not conscious but rather a necessary condition for consciousness of all kinds. Perception, which lies...

51 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 104, p. 211.
52 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 103, p. 211.
53 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 104, p. 211.
between sensation on the one hand and experience and knowledge on the other, is always conscious, hence cannot occur without a prior sensation. A perception is at most a precondition for experience and knowledge.

The triple distinction between sensation, perception, and experience and knowledge, which is intended to overcome the difficulty, which arises if objective knowledge depends on the subject, objectivity on subjectivity, leads to two further questions. How is it possible to go from sensations to perceptions? How is it possible to go from perceptions to experience and knowledge of objects.

Kant’s account of the transition from sensations to perceptions and experience and knowledge of objects is given in the complex deductions in both the A and B editions. It remains unclear how perception differs from experience and knowledge of objects, and how, if one acknowledges this crucial difference, the transition from one to the other can be understood.

Perceptions, which are individual reports, are not knowledge claims. The former are subjective and the latter, which are general or universal, are objective. In a perception, an individual reports on a person-centered individual claim for experience. In other words, a perception records no more than a subjective impression, which can and in fact routinely does differ from observer to observer. Such a claim is personal, not general or universal. In the case of knowledge, an individual or group makes a claim, which not only records what the individual or the group experiences, but, since it is based on a general rule, for instance a so-called universal law of nature, such as Newton’s second law, is in principle binding on all individuals in all times and places. At least in theory in normal conditions all observers have the same experience and knowledge of objects, whose movements are casually determined by general laws. There is an obvious difference between saying that I observe that water freezes at 0 C. and the claim that it is a law of nature that water freezes at 0 C. The former is an individual observation, hence, subjective and cannot count as an objective knowledge claim. The latter is in principle an illustration of a law of nature, which presumably justifies the observation, which, if it is in fact based on a universal law of nature, is in fact always the case, hence can be made in an identical way by any individual.

Kant uses these terms in different ways in his various writings and often in different ways within each of them. Merely in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he refers to perception i. A. as appearances “combined
with consciousness," 54 as “that which is immediately represented, through sensation, is immediately represented as real in space and time,” 55 as “representations accompanied by sensation,” 56 as “empirical consciousness,” 57 that is, consciousness “in which there is at the same time sensation” 58 as “merely subjective representation, by which one can only be conscious that the subject is affected, and by which one relates to an object in general,” 59 and as “sensation of which one is conscious.” 60

Kant’s remarks about experience are similarly confusing. In the Inaugural Dissertation, where he defines experience as “reflective cognition, which arises when several appearances are compared by the understanding,” he writes that “there is no way from appearance to experience except by reflection in accordance with the logical use of the understanding.” 61 He seems to be suggesting that in comparing appearances, or perceptions, we reach experience. His suggestion that the transition from perception to knowledge and experience occurs through what he designates as logical use of the understanding is presumably the basis of Sellars’ influential but obscure conception of the space of reasons 62 leading to his preference for science over folk psychology. 63 In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant presents an account in which there is a so-called mutual adaptation of concept and intuition. The most basic claim seems to be that “all synthesis, through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories; and since experience is cognition through connected perceptions, the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience, and are thus also valid a priori of all objects of experience.” 64 Yet if sensations are already brought under the categories at the level of percep-

54 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A 120, p. 238.
55 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 147, p. 254.
56 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 147, p. 254.
57 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 207, p. 290.
58 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 207, p. 290.
59 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 207, p. 290.
60 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 272, p. 325.
64 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 161, p. 262.
tion, then the relation between perceptions, which do not qualify as experience, and knowledge, which presupposes experience, is unclear.

Kant focuses this distinction better in the *Prolegomena*, where he defines experience as “the synthetic connections of appearances (perceptions) in a consciousness, insofar as this connection is necessary.” He gives an example in the text with respect to the expansion of air and another example in an important footnote.

If the sun shines on the stone, it becomes warm. This judgment is a mere judgment of perception and contains no necessity however often I and others also have perceived this; the perceptions are only usually found so conjoined. But if I say: the sun *warms* the stone, then beyond the perception is added the understanding’s concept of cause, which connects necessarily the concept of sunshine with that of heat, and the synthetic judgment becomes necessarily universally valid, hence objective, and changes from a perception into experience.

Understood in this way, a perception is subjective, but experience and knowledge is based on the identification of a causal relationship. But it is unclear how to go from mere perception to experience and knowledge.

Suffice it to say that even the main outlines of Kant’s response remain unclear for two reasons. First, there is an ambiguity about whether the conceptual machinery invoked to grasp the contributions from the side of sensory intuition as well as from the side of various types of synthesis is intended to account for the possibility of perception, for the possibility of experience and knowledge of objects, or both simultaneously. This remains unclear in Kant’s exposition of his position.

Second, if Kant admits the distinction between perception on the one hand and experience and objects of knowledge on the other, then it is further unclear how to account for the transition from perception to knowledge. An “ordinary” account would presumably talk about the historical development of scientific research. Perhaps this is implied in the reference in the *Inaugural Dissertation* cited above in which Kant mentions comparison of different perceptions in the understanding. From a historical perspective, in the scientific process individual perceptions are transformed, through the study of causal relationships, into general laws. For instance, as noted above, according to Kant further developments in physics after Copernicus led to advances in astronomical theory culminat-

ing Newtonian mechanics, which Kant regards as the definitive solution of the astronomical problem. Yet Kant, who claims that knowledge is a priori, does not have that option available with respect to his own theory in the Critique of Pure Reason. This work advances an a-historical account from the transcendental perspective, which is different from and incompatible with a historical analysis. Hence it remains unclear how on the basis of the critical philosophy the distinction between subjective perception and objective experience and knowledge can be explained.

VI. Kant and the Subject

So far I have brought out some of the ways that Kant relies on unconscious activity in his theory of cognition. Unconscious activity is a type of activity. Now I want to call attention to the link between the theory of activity, including unconscious activity, and Kant’s theory of the subject. In pointing to four questions, Kant famously contends that the theory of human being is the central question in the critical philosophy. His theory of the philosophical subject, which, in virtue of his basic anti-psychologism, differs from his theory of human being, but whose precise relation to finite human being remains unclear, is also central to his critical philosophy.

Kant was one of the first to teach the emerging science of anthropology. His theory of human being is described in his book on the topic. His theory of the subject, or perhaps more precisely his theory of the philosophical subject is expounded in his three Critiques. The common thread in all three Critiques is that in each case a form of human experience is explained in a regressive argument through a form of activity. He explains theoretical knowledge through the complex, but unconscious activity in which the cognitive subject “constructs” the cognitive object. He describes morality in terms of conscious activity in which the moral subject must freely determine the principle of its action on the level of pure practical reason and in fact so act on the level of practical reason. And he describes aesthetics in which human beings render aesthetic reflective judgements based on generalizing an individual’s personal reaction when confronted with an aesthetic object to all possible observers.

Kant’s approach to explaining different forms of human experience through different forms of activity suggests the possibility of formulating a unitary theory of the subject of experience by relating the different forms of activity. He points toward but never carries out this task, which is inscribed as it were in the general approach of the critical philosophy. Yet he makes two attempts to subordinate theoretical to practical reason, hence epistemology to ethics in the Critique of Judgment. In the Introduction to the first edition, he introduces judgment as a third faculty in an unsatisfactory attempt to create unity out of diversity. In the second edition, he makes use of reflective judgment to unify pure and practical reason. Judgment, in bringing the particular under the universal, subordinates pure reason, or the capacity to deduce the particular from the universal, to practical reason, or the capacity to form rules. Yet this further effort also fails since it presupposes the indemonstrable possibility of a harmony between the moral decision and its performance, which can only be thought but cannot be known.

Kant’s approach to understanding the subject in terms of conscious and unconscious activity is arguably more successful in explicating different forms of experience in terms of different forms of activity than in formulating a general theory of the subject as active or activity. Kant’s approach to the subject through its activity goes back in the tradition at least until Aristotle. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle sketches a theory of life as activity, and in the Poetics he describes artistic mimesis as the imitation of life. An approach to human being as basically active is further developed in modern times by a number of important thinkers, including Descartes, Fichte and Marx.

Descartes is widely believed to hold a spectator theory of the subject, which he apparently formulates, but never directly states, in the interval between the Discourse and the Meditations. An anticipation of this theory goes back to Descartes’ earliest writings. His approach to knowledge in the Rules already implies an as yet still unformulated theory of the cognitive subject. The first rule concerns correct judgments. In the Discourse, in to the best of my knowledge one of only two passages in his cor-
pus that directly refer to the theory, he cautiously remarks about “trying to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies the world displays.” For various reasons, the spectator theory is routinely taken as Descartes’ central theoretical commitment when his position is discussed. Yet, as the passage cited suggests, he also has an actor theory of the subject. The little-known actor view, which Descartes never develops, and which remains implicit in his writings, is worked out by his successors. The actor view follows by denying the main principles of the spectator view. For a human actor there is no bifurcation between mind and body, since the complex object called a human being is directly situated in the world, which we can know, and we have at best only indirect access to the mind.

In replying to Hume’s attack on causality, Kant formulates a theory of the subject largely inspired by the Cartesian view of the subject, especially the more familiar spectator theory. Though Kant denies we have direct access to the contents of mind, his conception of the subject shares with the spectator view the bifurcation of mind and body according to which the mind is wholly free, whereas the body belongs to the causal framework, and the depiction of the problem of knowledge as knowing a mind-independent real external world. One way to understand the relation is to say that Kant brings together within a single theory a view of the subject as both passive, like the Cartesian spectator, but active like the Cartesian actor. Yet unlike the Cartesian subject, for which consciousness unites thinking and being, the Kantian subject is both conscious and unconscious. For Descartes consciousness, or conscious activity is the condition of knowledge. But for Kant, it is not conscious but rather unconscious activity, which makes consciousness, experience and knowledge of objects possible.

VII. Conclusion: Kant and the Cognitive Unconscious

Views of unconscious spontaneous mental activity precede Kant, who gives it a powerful new focus in countering Hume. In his attack on causality, Hume invokes the spontaneous unconscious activity of the mind as the cause of the false perception of a causal relation among external objects. In effect, Kant responds to Hume in advancing a different view of unconscious spontaneous mental activity, hence a different view of

the cognitive subject. Unconscious mental activity or mental action, which is rarely studied directly, is arguably central for any theory of the mind.\textsuperscript{72} Kant’s theory of unconscious spontaneous mental activity, which has also not often been studied, is central for his own position as well as for the philosophy of mind.

Kant thinks that reason\textsuperscript{73} and the understanding are both spontaneous. In this paper I have focused mainly on the unconscious. The unconscious is fundamental to Kant’s theory of knowledge in two ways: concerning the passive reception of sensation as the contents of the sensory manifold, and with respect to the unconscious spontaneous activity through which it works up the sensory contents into objects of experience and knowledge.

Kant’s theory of unconscious activity is intrinsic to the so-called Copernican revolution, which can be paraphrased as the insight that the epistemological subject does not find, uncover or discover but rather “constructs,” makes or produces what it knows. Epistemological construction is not conscious but unconscious. Kant’s view of the subject’s cognitive activity as unconscious is central to the critical philosophy and to the later post-Kantian German idealist debate. His approach to cognition through unconscious but spontaneous mental activity is a central theme in post-Kantian German idealism.

Kant’s theory of unconscious spontaneous mental activity belongs to his claim to provide the only possible analysis of the general conditions of knowledge. He says that if one were to change anything at all, reason itself would be destroyed.\textsuperscript{74} He further divides the Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding into the objects of the pure understanding and the pure understanding itself. He says that the latter considers a subjective relation, which is important, but not the chief question, which concerns what understanding and reason can know a priori.\textsuperscript{75} But in relying on unconscious spontaneous activity, hence in surpassing the limits of experience, the only limit he sets himself in the critical philosophy, Kant seems to go beyond the limits of the understanding, beyond what can pos-


\textsuperscript{73} In the \textit{Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals}, he describes “reason” as “pure self-activity.” See Kant, \textit{Practical Philosophy}, p. 99.

\textsuperscript{74} See Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, B xxxviii, p. 120.

\textsuperscript{75} See Kant, \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, A xvii, p. 103.
sibly be known, in a theory that, since it cannot be verified through expe-
rience, remains largely speculative.