

PROBLEMATICAL AND CRITICAL IDEALISM
THE NEW DISCUSSION ABOUT THE 'COGITO' IN KANT'S
OPUS POSTUMUM

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It's well known that Kant paid little attention to the history of philosophy. The discussions about his predecessors were not systematical, but they responded to inner, precise problems of his philosophy. The same concerns Descartes. Kant wrote on the problematical idealism of Descartes shortly in the Prolegomena (§49) and then in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), in the "Refutation of Idealism", an addition that responded to criticism of the first edition.

When Kant speaks about improvement of the philosophy by Descartes, we can see that his role was thought as very modest.¹ It's true that some aspects of Descartes' philosophy already put forward some critical ideas (*Regulae*, AT IV 396-7), especially the general idea of the 'cogito'. But we are still far away from Kant.

Descartes tries to gain a firm foundation of philosophy with the methodical doubt. He criticises Aristotelian logic, because it couldn't lead to any new knowledge. But his own methodology is analytical in the same way, because he's just trying to find a legitimation of scientific activity, not being able, in fact, to explain the passage from 'cogito' to real science. First, he forgets that he needs the principle of contradiction during the whole process of doubt. Moreover, he would have to suppose a subject of the doubt from the very beginning, and he shouldn't reach it as a result of doubt. That's why the 'cogito' appears as a result of a conclusion, an idea that Kant criticises repeatedly. Descartes himself sees the problem but just when he is criticised (answers to the second objections, AT VII 140). Finally, when Descartes defends an idea of the 'res cogitans', he moves from 'cogito' to 'cogitatio', retaking the whole scheme of the old substance metaphysics that Kant definitely refuses (KrV, A254-6).

There are many signs that show Descartes being unable to provide a synthetical philosophy. The idea of the 'cogito' as the first known is one of them (*Regulae*, AT VIII 395). As for Kant, there's no privilegiated access to the subject.² One receives a knowledge of the subject in his act of knowing itself, because he's aiming for objectivity from the very beginning.³ But the most clear lack is the need of God to explain everything. The 'cogito' is the first principle perhaps, but God is the source of all truth, and even the origin of movement. The problem is that he needs the principle of causality to prove the existence of God, and he uses it without reasoning the validity of this principle before establishing the source of all validity. How can he pass from 'cogito' to God if God is the source of all truth? The progress of Kant in this sense is immense. Now it's the subject which has to explain everything, and which has to act by himself.⁴

¹ "Ein nicht geringes Verdienst um dieselbe (Verbesserung der spekulativen Philosophie) erwarb sich Descartes, indem er viel dazu beitrug, dem Denken Deutlichkeit zu geben durch sein aufgestelltes Kriterium der Wahrheit, das er in die Klarheit und Evidenz der Erkenntnis setzte", Logik, AA IX 32.

² "Das Bewußtsein seiner selbst ist also noch lange nicht ein Erkenntnis seiner selbst", KrV, B158.

³ "Ich muß Gegenstände meines Denkens haben und sie apprehendieren denn sonst bin ich meiner selbst unbewußt (cogito, sum: es darf nicht ergo lauten)", Op, AA XXI 82.

⁴ "nicht Gott als Wesen in der Welt, sondern die reine Idee der Selbstkonstruktion gleich die reine Intelligenz des Subjekts selbst", Op, AA XXI 152.

If the progress in the theoretical philosophy isn't enough to convince everyone, a look at the moral philosophy of both thinkers definitely shows that there is not a way back to Descartes. In Kant's philosophy we confront a subject which is not a substance but just activity:

Die analytische Einheit der Apperzeption ist nur unter der Voraussetzung irgend einer synthetischen möglich, KrV, B133.

The importance of this activity becomes more and more clear in the second edition of the first Critique, and we find the main idea behind it again published the following year in the second Critique:

Der Begriff der Freiheit (...) macht nun den Schlußstein von dem ganzen Gebäude eines Systems der reinen, selbst der spekulativen, Vernunft aus", KpV, AA V 3-4.

This synthetical active subject has to put together the intellectual and empirical sides of knowledge, the pure active subject and the subject in time. He knows the problem: "Der Satz aber, Ich denke, so fern er so viel sagt, als: ich existiere denkend, ist nicht bloße logische Funktion, sondern bestimmt das Subjekt (welches denn zugleich Objekt ist) in Ansehung der Existenz, und kann ohne den inneren Sinn nicht stattfinden (...) In ihm ist also schon nicht mehr bloße Spontaneität des Denkens, sondern auch Rezeptivität der Anschauung, d. i. das Denken meiner selbst auf die empirische Anschauung eben desselben Subjekts angewandt", B429-30. But we haven't yet a proper explication. We only find new elaborations of the problem in the *Opus postumum*.

One of the values of the *Opus postumum*, but not the most important, consists in showing that Kant's philosophy remained alive and open until the end. After dealing with the subjects of physics and after long discussions about ether, he turned back to the main themes of critical philosophy (in 1799 at the age of 75). Ether was no longer a physical element but rather a transcendental principle that made physics possible. This thought led him to the ideas of autoaffection and autoposition. Now the point is similar to the one that caused the discussion with Descartes in 1787; that is, the foundation of an external objective reference, and as a consequence, we encounter a new discussion about the 'cogito' in 1799-1801.

Kant tries to define the idea of the synthetic apperception in a systematical way. In fact, he speaks no more of apperception but of autoposition as the unitarian source of whole philosophy, both theoretical and practical.

Daß der Mensch nicht allein denkt sondern auch zu sich selbst sagen kann ich denke mach ihn zu einer Person", Op, AA XXI 103, 19-20.

Kant avoids the two extremes, the 'cogito' as just a tautological principle, and the 'cogito' as a metaphysical substance. The 'ich denke' is analytical, but not as a judgment or reasoning but rather as an act of selfobjectivation.

Es wird mir also in dem Satz ich bin denkend weil er gantz identisch ist gar kein Fortschritt kein synthetisches Urtheil gegeben denn er ist tautologisch und der vermeynte Schluß: ich denke darum ich bin ist kein Schluß; sondern der erste Act des Erkenntnisses ist: ich bin mir selbst ein Gegenstand des Denkens (cogitabile) und der Anschauung (dabile)", Op, AA XXII 79.⁵

⁵ "Ich bin existierend enthält die Apprehension, d. i. , ist nicht blos ein subjectives Urtheil sondern macht mich selbst zum Object der Anschauung im Raume und der Zeit", Op, AA XXII 96.

The first act is the position of the subject as an object; that is, the setting of himself as space and time. The practical idea of autonomy is the first principle of all, and the making of himself means that the subject has to establish his own receptivity. This autoposition explains the necessary connection of sensibility and understanding that remained unexplained in the first Critique.

Das sum ist ein Verbum wodurch ich mich selbst setze.... Der erste analytische Act des Bewußtseyns ist der durch welchen das Subject sich selbst zum Gegenstande der Anschauung macht, nicht logisch (analytisch) nach der Regel der Identität sondern metaphysisch (synthetisch), Op, AA XXII 85.

Descartes could give some grounds for analytical geometry but not for mathematical physics⁶ and even less for moral philosophy. As for Kant, the subject establishes space and time, so that he as an active mobile subject can fulfil their concrete configuration and, at the same time, set in this way the frame for his moral activity.⁷

⁶ "Les constructions cinématiques, qui ne servaient à Descartes que de méthode auxiliaire dans sa *Géométrie*, donnent lieu chez Kant à un premier principe", Vuillemin, J. *Mathématiques et métaphysique chez Descartes*, PUF, Paris, 1960, p. 124.

⁷ "Ich bin denkend ist ein analytischer Satz der nicht einen Schluss (cogito, ergo sum) enthält sondern nur die Autonomie der synthetischen Erkenntnis a priori mich selbst nach Principien zu bestimmen und zur Erfahrung als einem System (Physik) fortzuschreiten", Op, AA XXI 102.