
Kant's Distinction Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge

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Philosophy, according to Kant, divides into two primary branches, one theoretical, the other practical. Since Kant takes philosophy to be a type of knowledge,¹ this division yields two sorts of knowledge. In his mature critical writings Kant repeatedly refers to these two basic parts of philosophy, one resting on the understanding's concepts of nature, the other on reason's concept of freedom. Even after the unexpected supplement to his account of the cognitive faculties provided in the *Critique of Judgment*, in which he claims that, in addition to the a priori principles of the understanding and reason, there is also an a priori principle proper to the power of judgment, Kant does not alter his conception of philosophy as dividing into just these two fundamental branches.

Not surprisingly, this distinction has received considerable attention in the scholarly literature on Kant's philosophy. It figures most prominently in discussions of his resolution of the problem of freedom and determinism, often in the guise of a distinction between the theoretical and practical "standpoints." But it arises in a variety of other connections as well. For example, it is an essential element in Kant's diagnosis of the problems of speculative metaphysics and in his effort to put metaphysics back on its proper practical footing. And because it is so basic to Kant's philosophy as a whole, it is bound to come into view whenever general questions about his philosophical system come up for discussion, such as the question regarding the unity of speculative and practical reason, to which Kant on occasion draws our attention.

Although there is no denying the importance and interest of these familiar questions and topics, my main reason for taking up Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge in this paper stems more particularly from an interest in reaching a clearer understanding of Kant's conception of practical knowledge. This conception has not received a great deal of attention, but I have become convinced that Kant's moral philosophy fruitfully can be approached by thinking of it as based on an account of practical knowledge. It is true, of course, that Kant's ethical writings appear to focus on the will and the principles governing the exercise of free choice, though we may not find it natural to regard the will as a cognitive faculty and the exercise of free choice as a type of knowledge. But one does not need to read very far or very deeply to notice, at least if one looks for it, that Kant is indeed concerning himself in these texts with a certain type of knowledge—a fact that is indicated by his famous (some would say notorious) identification of the will with practical reason.

By 'practical knowledge' I mean the familiar sort of knowledge: what would be

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good or right to do, what moves a virtuous person to act, and what parents, in saying such things to their children as “You know better than to do that,” presume their children also to possess, albeit imperfectly. This sort of knowledge is quite different from what nowadays philosophers of action, following G. E. M. Anscombe, typically mean by the expression ‘practical knowledge’. When Kant speaks of practical knowledge, he means knowledge one has insofar as one “knows what to do”—that is, knows what one ought to do or what would be good to do. According to the sense in which the expression is commonly used today, practical knowledge is the knowledge one has insofar as one “knows what one is doing,” where this knowledge is not by observation.² The difference, then, is that between my knowledge that I ought to return the book I have borrowed from you and my knowledge, in returning it, that I am returning it. It is the first of these two sorts of knowledge that Kant has in view and in which I will be interested here.

Among the questions I will be concerned with are, first, whether there is a single generic conception of knowledge that figures in the concept of practical as well as that of theoretical knowledge, and second, if there is a common genus, what the specific difference is between practical and theoretical knowledge. I shall, of course, mainly be interested in the theoretical/practical distinction as it figures in Kant, though it is also a matter of concern to me whether Kant’s understanding of this distinction has some connection with the views of other prominent philosophers in our tradition, such as Aristotle. Along the way, I will pay some attention to how Kant’s understanding of the theoretical/practical distinction differs from certain other attempts to articulate it. And I shall speak sometimes of theoretical or practical *reason* as well as of theoretical or practical knowledge, as I shall be thinking of theoretical and practical reason or intellect as, respectively, the faculties for these two sorts of knowledge.

I. Some Attempts at Drawing the Distinction

1. Before turning to Kant, I want to consider a few of the distinctions we might have in view when we speak of the theoretical/practical distinction. There are, of course, many familiar contrasts and oppositions that may come to mind here—thought and action, belief and desire, reason and passion, and so forth. These plainly do not coincide, but they seem to bear some affinity to one another and some connection with the theoretical/practical distinction. Obviously, though, this distinction *cannot* be captured by the familiar contrast that dissociates reason entirely from all forms of desire whatsoever—the contrast we find expressed in Hume’s often cited assertion that “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” and “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.”³ For the very idea that there is such a thing as practical reason amounts to the thought that reason, a cognitive faculty, can be practical, that is, can determine choice and thereby move the subject to act, and hence to a denial that cognition and desire necessarily exclude each other.

It is entirely open to us, however, to go partway down the road with Hume and accept the suggestion that there is indeed some *distinction* between knowledge and desire, without supposing that they must be conceived in such a way as to leave them entirely *dissociated* from each other. We might, accordingly, accept the possi-

bility of genuinely practical reason yet think there is some point in trying to understand the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge in terms of the contrast between knowledge and desire. If so, then it will seem natural to conceive of the distinction as between a mental state, or representation, that is *purely* or *simply* cognitive and one that is somehow *both* cognitive *and* desiderative.⁴ This is, to be sure, only a crude first stab at a characterization, but it does at least identify cognition as the genus and point to a desiderative element or aspect as what specifically differentiates practical from theoretical knowledge.

2. We will eventually return to this way of conceiving of the distinction, but first we should note that the idea that a mental representation might be both cognitive and desiderative may well seem problematic when considered in the light of a distinction to which appeal has been made often in recent decades when philosophers of mind or philosophers of action attempt to articulate the difference between cognitive representations, such as beliefs about what is the case, and non-cognitive, or desiderative, representations, such as intentions or desires in general. As it is usually characterized, this distinction is between different “directions of fit.”⁵ In the case of belief, the representation is supposed to fit the object (or “the world”), whereas in the case of desire, the object is supposed to fit the representation. If some belief and its object do not agree, it is the belief, not the object, that is to be regarded as failing to fit and that must be adjusted or replaced in order to secure the requisite relation of fit. But where there is a lack of agreement between some desire and its object, it is the object, not the desire, that fails to fit and so needs adjustment or alteration. Thus, cognitive representation stands to its object as an artist’s sketch of a building stands to the building sketched, and desiderative representation stands to its object as the architect’s blueprint for a building stands to the building constructed according to it. Let us call this rough picture the “two directions of fit” model of the cognitive/desiderative distinction. The difficulty it raises is readily apparent: If we take this distinction between directions of fit to capture the distinction between the cognitive and the desiderative, then the idea on which we were relying in our first stab at a characterization of the theoretical/practical distinction—the idea that cognitive representations can also be desiderative—leaves us confronted with the problem of understanding how a representation and its object could have both directions of fit at once.

3. We do, of course, sometimes criticize one another for being foolish in our intentions and desires, as when we say, “You’re trying to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear,” or “You’re beating a dead horse.” The fact that we criticize intentions and desires in this way might be taken to indicate that desires open to such criticism do in some respect or to some extent have the direction of fit that cognition and belief are thought to have. Putting the thought more specifically, we could say that intentions and desires (or at least desires over which we have some control) are generally open to criticism if they do not fit their objects with respect to their real, or physical, possibility—or, perhaps more perspicuously, if they do not fit what is possible, or practicable.

Encouraged by this thought, we might consider whether our first stab at characterizing the distinction between theoretical and practical reason could be squared with the “two directions of fit” model by elaborating the latter along the following lines. We first lay it down that cognitive representation is supposed to fit *what is*,

whereas in the case of desiderative representation it is *what is* that is supposed to fit the representation. But we then distinguish between *what is actual* and *what is possible*, and say the following: In the case of cognitive representation of what is actual, the representation is supposed to fit what is actual and a fortiori also what is possible. In the case of desiderative representation, on the other hand, the representation is supposed to fit what is *possible*, or practicable; but, provided that it does, what is *actual* is supposed to fit the representation. Thus cognitive and desiderative representations have the same direction of fit with regard to what is possible, but they have opposite directions of fit with regard to what is actual.

For example, your belief that the seed you see me planting in my garden will grow into an apple tree is supposed to fit its object, the seed, not only with respect to possibility but also with respect to actuality, so that for the belief to have the presumed fit the seed must not only possibly but actually grow into an apple tree. And were the seed not in fact to grow into an apple tree, or were it impossible for it to do so (as it would be, say, if it were a pear seed), then, in either case, the fault would lie with the belief. (That is, it would be the belief that needed to be altered or replaced to secure the fit.) On the other hand, my intention to grow the seed I'm planting into an apple tree is supposed to fit its object only with respect to possibility: if it were not really possible for me to grow the seed into an apple tree, then my intention would not have the fit with its object that it purports to have and the fault would lie with it. But if what is intended is really possible, then a further question of fit arises with respect to actuality, and here the fit runs in the other direction: if there is a lack of fit, then the fault lies in the execution or defective realization of the intention, not in the intention itself.

This elaboration of the "two directions of fit" model does help bring into view a certain cognitive element in desiderative representation. But it does not help us make sense of the idea of practical knowledge. If practical knowledge had a double directionality of fit of the sort just described, then the cognitive element of practical knowledge would consist in knowledge of the practicability of its object. But it is not such knowledge that is intended when we think of practical reason as a source of a distinctive type of cognition, namely, cognition of what would be good or right to do—a type of cognition that can *itself* move the will and determine choice. The mere knowledge of what is practicable can never move the will, even though it may provide limits for the latter's rational exercise. That, in fact, was Hume's point.

4. Another way in which one might try to adapt the "two directions of fit" model to accommodate the distinctive character of practical knowledge (as knowledge of what is good or right to do that can direct the exercise of choice) would be to suppose that the different directions of fit concern the representation's relation to two quite different objects. Practical knowledge might be regarded as being cognitive with respect to one object and desiderative with respect to another, and standing between these objects in something like the way in which the orders given by a foreman at a construction site stand between the architect's blueprint, on the one hand, and the building and its construction on the other. According to this way of thinking, practical knowledge would be desiderative, in that it is what choice and action are supposed to fit, yet also cognitive in that the judgments in which it consists are supposed to fit what would be good or right to do.

As long as we are guided by the "two directions of fit" model, it will seem nat-

ural here to conceive of the relation between practical knowledge and its cognitive object in the way it was viewed by the rational intuitionists of the seventeenth century (for example, Ralph Cudworth and Samuel Clarke). According to these philosophers, as they are commonly understood, reason is a capacity to apprehend certain intelligible objects—the essences and natures of things—that are prior to and independent of that apprehension and even of our rational capacity to apprehend them. On this picture, accordingly, practical knowledge lies in reason's apprehension of independently subsisting "ought to be's," or teleologically conceived natures and the relations of fitness and propriety derivable from them, just as reason's theoretical knowledge lies in an apprehension of the independently subsisting essences and natures of the things that are. For the rational intuitionist, then, in both the practical and the theoretical case, knowledge must fit its object.

There are, no doubt, some who at this point will want to ask what sort of thing this object of practical knowledge could be.⁶ But the pertinent consideration for our purposes here is that the conception of rational intuition on which the intuitionists rely is not one that can occupy any place within Kant's thinking. According to Kant, the distinction between the intellectual (or rational) and the sensible is based on the distinction between spontaneity and receptivity, but to view reason as capable of apprehending independently subsisting objects is to treat it as a kind of receptivity, or sensibility, whose representations are effects these objects produce in the mind.⁷ Kant does entertain the idea of intellectual intuition, as a kind of cognitive ideal suitable only for an infinite being, but this type of cognition would produce the object it knows and therefore would involve no receptivity; moreover, since here the object would have to fit the knowledge, the very idea of such cognition runs against the "two directions of fit" model.

As this view of the intellect as spontaneous informs Kant's conceptions of theoretical *and* practical knowledge, it will be useful to consider briefly how it bears on the picture of theoretical knowledge furnished by the "two directions of fit" model, before we turn to Kant's own way of distinguishing these two sorts of knowledge.

5. Since theoretical knowledge involves no desiderative element, the "two directions of fit" model will depict it as standing in a single unidirectional relation of fit with its object. This relation involves two components: the familiar relation of agreement that figures in the traditional conception of truth as correspondence with the object, and the *direction* of the fit or agreement. Theoretical knowledge is thought of as fitting the object, so that if some judgment that purports to be theoretical knowledge does not agree with the object, it is the judgment, not the object, that is to be regarded as failing to fit. And because such knowledge is conceived as fitting the object, this object must be regarded not only as existing independent of the knowledge of it, but also as having a determinate nature, or constitution, independent of that knowledge and even of the subject's capacity for such knowledge.

From the points already noted above, it is not difficult to see that Kant would deny that this picture provides a satisfactory articulation of theoretical knowledge. To think of the knowledge as having to fit, or conform to, the object would be to run afoul of the idea that the understanding, the faculty in whose exercise theoretical knowledge consists, lies in the spontaneity rather than the receptivity of our representations. It would, in other words, be to adopt a view of such knowledge that would simply rule out, from the start, both the possibility of a priori theoretical

knowledge and the related possibility that theoretical knowledge might *in general* be akin to the cognitive ideal represented in Kant's idea of intellectual intuition in virtue of having a certain self-sufficiency with respect to the *form* of its object, despite differing from such intuitive cognition in that the *existence* of its object is independent of it. (I will say a bit more about this possibility later). Thus Kant opts to follow the "Copernican" way of thinking, basing his entire account of human (discursive) theoretical knowledge on the proposition that "objects must conform to our cognition." (Bxvi)⁸

Moreover, some of Kant's remarks about truth suggest that he would find the view that our theoretical knowledge fits or conforms to objects to be connected with a certain confusion about what in fact takes place when we verify or confirm our theoretical judgments. Kant has no quarrel with the traditional nominal definition of truth, according to which truth lies in the agreement of knowledge with its object. But if we take this definition to be an expression of the notion that theoretical knowledge is supposed to *fit* its object, we then run the risk of embracing the mistaken idea that this definition provides a universal criterion, or touchstone, of truth, and that the procedure of verifying a judgment that purports to be true, or in agreement with its object, must in the end lie in an immediate comparison of that judgment, that ostensible bit of knowledge, with the object to determine whether the former really does agree with, or fit, the latter. But as Kant observes, such comparison is impossible:

I can compare the object with my knowledge only *through my knowing it*. My knowledge is therefore to confirm itself, which however is far from being sufficient for truth. For since the object is outside me and the knowledge is in me, I can judge only whether my knowledge of the object agrees with my knowledge of the object. Such a circle in definition was called by the ancients *diallele*. And actually the logicians were always reproached for this mistake by the skeptics, who noted that with this definition of truth it is just as if someone were to testify in court and in doing so were to appeal to a witness with whom no one is acquainted, but who wants to make himself credible by maintaining that the one who called him as a witness is an honest man. The accusation was certainly well founded. (L 50; cf. A57–58/B82–83)

Anything that might at first seem to be a radical (non-question-begging) comparison of a judgment with its object turns out to be a comparison of one judgment with another. As Kant says in the first *Critique*, this is a mere milking of a he-goat. (A58/B83)

Kant recognizes, of course, that we do concern ourselves with the agreement of our judgments with *experience*, supposing that here we have a touchstone of truth. But as the passage just considered would lead us to expect, he regards such agreement as a special case of agreement among judgments. Experience, he says, is empirical knowledge (v. B147); it is therefore (as knowledge) the work of the understanding: "the product of the understanding from materials of sensibility." (P 316; cf. A1, B127, A97–98) Since, for Kant, knowledge includes the employ-

ment of concepts as well as intuition (v. A51/B75–76, B146), and since the understanding, in whose exercise such employment of concepts consists, can make no other use of concepts than to judge by means of them (v. A68/B93), knowledge “rests on judgments.” (*Anth* 141)⁹ Hence experience does not lie merely in empirical intuition but includes, in addition and at its basis, judgment. So agreement with experience is agreement with *judgments* of experience.

For Kant, then, the fundamental conception of theoretical knowledge cannot include the idea that such knowledge is supposed to fit, or conform to, its object. Theoretical knowledge must, rather, be conceived in a way that preserves the idea that it involves a certain self-sufficiency, at least with respect to the form of its object, if not also with respect to the object’s existence.

Kant’s view will no doubt strike some as idiosyncratic and unrepresentative of traditional conceptions of theoretical knowledge. Although here is not the place to explore whether this might be so, it is worth noting that it is not as easy as it may appear to demonstrate that Kant’s conception is unrepresentative.¹⁰ Consider, for example, the case of Aristotle, who, along with Kant, stands at the top of the list of figures in our philosophical tradition who have done the most to articulate the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. Aristotle might, at first glance, seem to be a prime example of a traditional philosopher who regards theoretical knowledge as conforming to its object.¹¹ Aristotle conceives of sense-perception as a reception of form, maintaining that just as wax receives a form from the seal, so the eye receives a form from the visible object. And he seems to offer a similar account of the intellect’s cognizance of what is intelligible. But it may be asked whether this idea of reception of form is a *fundamental* element of Aristotle’s conception of theoretical knowledge (*theoria*). If it were, it would be very difficult to make sense of his well-known identification of divine activity as *theoria*. Aristotle takes theoretical knowledge to be the most self-sufficient form of knowledge and, as such, the only form in which divine cognition could consist. But if divine theoretical knowledge conformed to its object, the object would exist and have a nature independent of that knowledge, and the knowledge would accordingly depend on the object and thus not be self-sufficient. Such knowledge therefore cannot be regarded as fitting, or conforming to, the object. Rather than being subordinate to its object, the thinking (*nous*) in which divine *theoria* consists is dominant and controlling with regard to all that it knows.

It appears, then, that, in addition to hampering our efforts to throw light on the idea of practical knowledge, the “two directions of fit” model may also not be capturing the basic traditional conception of theoretical knowledge. More particularly, it seems quite clear from the considerations so far brought forward that this model cannot be involved in the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge as it is expounded by Kant.

II. Kant’s Way of Drawing the Distinction

1. If the idea of different directions of fit does not provide a suitable means of capturing Kant’s distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, then how are we to understand this most basic division within his philosophy? The following passage from the first *Critique* furnishes what is perhaps Kant’s most familiar way of

drawing the distinction: "I content myself here with defining theoretical knowledge as that through which I know *what is* [*was da ist*], and practical knowledge as that through which I represent *what ought to be* [*was da sein soll*]." (A633/B661)¹² In these definitions we find Kant distinguishing the two types of knowledge by way of what at first glance would appear to be a distinction between their objects. Theoretical knowledge is knowledge of what is, or of what exists, whereas practical knowledge is knowledge of what ought to be, or of what ought to exist.

Now to suggest that the distinction is drawn by way of a distinction among the objects known may invite an objection similar to the "mince pie syllogism" objection that Elizabeth Anscombe raised against certain accounts of the practical syllogism¹³—the objection, namely, that the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge must originate in a difference in the form of knowledge, not a difference in the objects known. The difference we are looking for is not at all like the difference between, say, the sciences of botany and zoology. In fact, however, the definitions of theoretical and practical knowledge that Kant offers here are not open to this objection. An indication of this is that there is nothing in the concepts of what is and of what ought to be that rules out the possibility that (as Leibniz maintained) what ought to be and what is are one and the same. To understand the difference between these concepts, we must refer back to the types of cognition to which they are related; we cannot locate what is and what ought to be under some common genus, as we can locate plant and animal under the genus *self-organized being*.

But though these definitions are not subject to the objection just mentioned, they do not provide Kant's most illuminating characterization of how practical knowledge differs from theoretical. For one thing, the definition of practical knowledge provides no clear expression of the desiderative component in practical knowledge, as it does not clearly imply that such knowledge can determine choice. Nor do these definitions give us reason not to think that Kant would claim, with the rational intuitionists, that in both the practical and the theoretical cases it is knowledge that must fit its object, not the reverse. Yet as we have noted, Kant would certainly reject any attempt to conceive of the relation between practical knowledge and its object according to a general picture of knowledge as passively fitting its object, as the waxen seal fits the signet ring—a picture that he rejects even in the case of theoretical knowledge.

It is worth noting, though, that in giving these definitions, Kant remarks that they are merely definitions with which he is prepared to content himself as sufficient for the purpose at hand.¹⁴ Apparently, then, he supposes that more adequate characterizations are possible.

2. Happily, more illuminating characterizations are, in fact, elsewhere supplied. Perhaps the most helpful are those provided in a passage near the beginning of the preface to the second edition of the first *Critique*. Kant has just finished discussing the merely formal science of logic, which expounds the reflective knowledge the intellect has of its own operations, and he is turning his attention to what he describes as the sciences properly and objectively so called—that is, the *material* sciences, which contain knowledge that, as he says in the *Groundwork*, "contemplates some object." (G 387) Before he goes on to consider some of the particular material sciences, Kant offers a brief comment dividing knowledge into its two fundamen-

tal types:

Now so far as reason is to be in these sciences, something within them must be cognized a priori, and its knowledge can be related to its object in two ways, either merely *to determine* this object and its concept (which¹⁵ must be given from elsewhere), or also *to make it actual*. The former is *theoretical* and the latter *practical knowledge* of reason. (Bix-x; cf. *KpV* 46, 89)

Though brief, this passage throws considerable light on Kant's understanding of both theoretical and practical knowledge and therefore merits close attention.

The first thing I want to point out in this passage is that it seems to include a generic characterization of knowledge—or at least of rational material knowledge—under which the two species of theoretical and practical knowledge can be located. Such knowledge *in general*, Kant appears to be supposing, is related to its object to determine that object and its concept. But what does this mean? Let us begin with the idea of determining a concept. Kant says at one point that “determination is a predicate that is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it.” (A598/B626) Now, as is well known from Kant's discussion of the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, the enlargement of a concept is the work of an ampliative, or synthetic, judgment. Thus knowledge (material knowledge) is in general synthetic in character. All knowledge presupposes a concept of its object, which it determines in a synthetic judgment. Such judgments Kant calls determining judgments, and he says that in such judgments there is a concept of the object that lies at the basis of the determination, a concept that “prescribes the rule for the power of judgment and so occupies the position of the principle.” (20:211) But if this concept of the object, by prescribing the rule for its own determination, does indeed serve as the principle, or source, for that determination, it would seem to follow that it is from this very concept of the object that the knowledge that determines that concept originates, and it would appear, therefore, that it belongs to Kant's conception of knowledge in general that is *self-determining*. This is, in fact, I think, one way of expressing what he has in mind when he speaks of the *spontaneity* of knowledge (A51/B75).

What, then, does Kant mean by speaking of the determination of the *object* as well as of its concept? It will not do here to suppose that in saying that knowledge determines its object Kant is simply speaking in an offhand way and does not have anything definite in mind, or that he means nothing more than that in cognizing an object we make a “determination”—that is, a judgment, or decision—regarding how it stands with the object. Kant consistently speaks of knowledge as the determination of the object and does so in a way that indicates that he is not just speaking casually, but rather has something quite specific in mind, and indeed thinks that knowledge can be *defined* as the determination of the object (e.g., at B166n). This is not an idea that is explicitly explained in the *Critique*, but one important passage from §14 in the second edition provides a clue to Kant's meaning. In this passage, Kant is again speaking of the relation of representation to its object, and after remarking that this relation is possible in only two ways—either through the object's making the representation possible or through the representation's making

the object possible—he goes on to explain in outline how the latter sort of relation can occur in the case of theoretical knowledge:

because representation in itself (for its causality by means of the will is here not under discussion) does not produce its object *in respect of its existence*, nonetheless¹⁶ the representation is a priori determining with regard to the object if it be the case that only through the representation is it possible *to know anything as an object*. (A92/B125)

Here Kant seems to suggest that for a representation to determine its object a priori is for it to produce its object, but not in respect of its existence. If not in respect of existence, then in respect of what? No clear answer is supplied by the immediate context of this passage, but given Kant's common practice of contrasting form and existence,¹⁷ it seems reasonable to suppose that he is claiming that for a representation to determine its object a priori is for it to produce its object with respect to its form, as opposed to its existence.

This idea of a representation's producing the form of its object a priori is, of course, familiar enough, for it is the very idea that Kant elaborates in his doctrine that the pure sensible representations of space and time determine the form of appearances, or objects of our possible knowledge, and in his parallel doctrine that the pure concepts of the understanding similarly determine the form of the combination of those appearances, as objects of nature. As Kant expresses the idea toward the end of the transcendental deduction, "the laws of the appearances in nature must agree with the understanding and its a priori form, that is, its capacity *to combine* the manifold in general" just as "the appearances themselves must agree with the form of a priori sensible intuition." (B164) But Kant's specification here in the passage from §14 that he is speaking of how a representation can be *a priori* determining with regard to an object carries the implicit suggestion that he thinks there are also cases in which a representation is merely *empirically* determining with regard to the object. If it is on account of a representation's being a condition under which it is possible to know *anything at all* as an object that it can determine its object *a priori*, then we can presume that, in the empirical case, cognition determines its object only under certain empirical conditions. For in the empirical as in the a priori case, we are concerned with a determining synthetic judgment, in which a predicate is "added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it," a judgment in which I go out beyond the concept to add to it "properties that are not contained in this concept yet belong to it," and since, Kant says, "this is not possible other than through my determining my object in accordance with the conditions either of empirical intuition or of pure intuition," (A718/B746) in the empirical case the determination of the object must, of course, be carried out in accordance with the conditions of empirical intuition, or, as Kant also puts it, "through a given empirical representation." (20:211) In other words, empirical synthetic judgment depends on the possibility of direct perceptual encounter with the specific object that it determines. And this is, in fact, what Kant says takes place in empirical cognition in general, and indeed in experience itself: "Experience," he says, "is an empirical knowledge, that is, a knowledge that through perceptions determines an object." (B218)

We can say of knowledge in general, then, be it a priori or empirical, that for it to determine its object is for it to produce the object with respect to its form. This is not the occasion to launch a full exploration of what exactly this idea of formal production means, though I take it that Kant's account of the productive synthesis of the imagination, or the understanding's determination of sensibility, together with his doctrine of the schematism, is an attempt on his part to elaborate how, in the theoretical case, knowledge determines its object or produces its form. I also take it that it is to precisely this idea of knowledge's determining its object that Kant is referring in his famous Copernican proposition that "objects must conform to our knowledge." (Bxvi) If this is correct, then this *generic* characterization of knowledge that we have found in the passage from the second edition preface indicates that the Copernican proposition applies to empirical as well as to a priori, and to practical as well as to theoretical knowledge. Knowledge in general, then, is for Kant a self-determination of our conceptual representations to which the objects therein contemplated must conform.

3. With this outline of the genus in mind, let us now look at the species and how the two are distinguished. Whereas the generic conception concerns the relation of knowledge to its object with respect to the latter's *form*, the species seem to be distinguished by reference to different ways in which knowledge can be related to the *existence* of its object.¹⁸ Although the object of theoretical knowledge must conform to that knowledge, it is nevertheless true that our theoretical knowledge depends on the object's being given to us from elsewhere. We could have no theoretical knowledge of objects were it not for their being given to us through being present to the senses, which in turn would not be possible did they not already actually exist. It goes without saying, of course, that in the case of theoretical knowledge, where the objects known are given from elsewhere and so cannot with respect to their existence be the products of the knowledge of them, the intelligibility of the idea that knowledge produces the form of its object depends on Kant's distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves and his claim that theoretical knowledge is only of appearances. But precisely because theoretical knowledge does not produce its object in respect of its existence, the fact that its object must be an appearance does not prevent it from being the case that were the object not given from elsewhere, no theoretical knowledge of it would be possible.

In the case of practical knowledge, on the other hand, there is no such dependence on the object's being given from elsewhere: practical knowledge is productive of its object not only with respect to the latter's form, but even with respect to its existence. Now this description of how practical knowledge is related to its object might appear to make practical knowledge indistinguishable from intellectual intuition, the divine cognition with which human discursive cognition is contrasted, and to which Kant tacitly alludes in the passage from §14. But the distinction between these two can be duly maintained if we bear in mind that practical knowledge, like theoretical knowledge, is the product of discursive intellect, whose knowledge always proceeds from concepts, or general representations, rather than from intuitions, or singular representations, and further that, as a result, in the case of practical knowledge, the production of the object is always the arrangement, in accordance with a general form, of presupposed matter, whereas, in the case of intellectual intuition, there is no matter requisite as a condition under which the production

is possible.

To say that practical knowledge is productive with respect to both the form and the actuality of its object is to say that practical knowledge is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for the existence of its object. Insofar as practical knowledge is productive with respect to its object's form, it is a condition even of the object's possibility and as such a necessary condition of the object's existence. And insofar as practical knowledge is productive with respect to the object's actuality, it is a sufficient condition of that object's existence, at least where circumstances are not unfavorable.

Now it might seem obviously mistaken to suggest that practical knowledge is a necessary and sufficient condition of its object's existence. For there are plainly occasions on which the object of such knowledge might be obtained by chance, or good fortune alone, and other occasions on which, owing to error in theoretical judgment or to some mishap in execution, the knowledge fails to produce its object. But here it is important to bear in mind that the spontaneity (self-consciousness) of knowledge requires that the division of knowledge into practical and theoretical be made within knowledge itself, that is, through a self-conscious specification that in the case of practical knowledge lies in such knowledge's awareness of itself as productive with respect to the *existence* as well as the form of its object. Thus, it is a constitutive feature of practical knowledge that it is productive of the actuality of its object only through being conscious of being productive; in other words, the efficacy of practical knowledge lies in its understanding itself to be efficacious. As Kant understands practical knowledge, then, its object is always something that is *cognized* as the effect of that very practical knowledge itself. Because practical knowledge, as *knowledge*, is spontaneous, it involves self-consciousness, and because it is *practical*, self-consciousness that includes its own understanding of itself as practical or efficacious, and accordingly, necessarily cognizes its object *as its own effect*. Thus the only way in which the object of practical knowledge can be realized is through the efficacy of practical knowledge itself. And the self-consciousness of practical knowledge itself includes such knowledge's understanding of itself as a sufficient cause of its object's existence. The truth, or agreement with its object, of such practical representation of sufficiency is not undermined in a given case if, owing to error or other mishap in execution, the knowledge does not, in fact, bring its object into existence. And where such knowledge fully realizes itself with respect to its efficacy, it is a sufficient condition of its object, even though this sufficiency is itself, of course, dependent upon certain conditions.

The following simple example may serve to illustrate how practical knowledge has this doubly productive relation to its object. The practical knowledge that health is good has as its object one's health. This health, however, is not conceived simply as a good condition of one's body, but rather as a condition of one's body that is itself the effect of one's practical knowledge of it as good. Thus the practical knowledge of the object's goodness is the *unique* cause of the object's actuality, and this is as much as to say that practical knowledge produces the object's form; the object depends on the knowledge in just the way that a thing that has an essence or form depends on that essence or form.

We are now in a position to see more clearly how practical knowledge in Kant's sense is related to practical knowledge in the sense of "knowing what one is

doing”—the sense in which Anscombe and others understand it. Knowledge in this latter sense does not seem clearly to belong to either of the two species of knowledge Kant distinguishes, but it is possible to situate it in relation to his distinction. The reference to efficacy contained in the second of Kant’s two characterizations of practical knowledge enables us to express the difference between the two senses as follows: In Kant’s sense, the expression ‘practical knowledge’ signifies an efficacious knowledge; in the “knowing what one is doing” sense, it signifies a certain knowledge of efficacy. While practical knowledge in this latter sense implies the existence of an object (one’s action) with which it is in agreement,¹⁹ practical knowledge in Kant’s sense does not, though as practical it works to *produce* the existence of its object. Because of this difference, only practical knowledge in the “knowing what one is doing” sense depends on successful execution: in the case of inadvertent action (that is, unintended action contrary to choice, where the defect lies in the execution, not in the intention or choice), the conception of what one is doing that lies in one’s intention is not in agreement with what one is doing, but the practical judgment by which one determines what one is to do can nevertheless be knowledge of what one ought to do. Practical knowledge in Kant’s sense does require, however, as a condition of its very possibility as knowledge that is practical, the real *possibility* of successful execution, and therefore insofar as it has practical perfection—that is, perfection with respect to efficacy and hence in its capacity for execution—it is also knowledge of *how* to do what it would be good to do and thereby, in the exercise of the latter where conditions are not unfavorable, practical knowledge in the “knowing what one is doing” sense as well. Thus *efficacious knowledge* (practical knowledge in Kant’s sense) can perfect itself with respect to its efficacy through developing its implicit understanding of itself as efficacious into *knowledge of its efficacy* (practical knowledge in the “knowing what one is doing” sense).

But to return to the comparison with theoretical knowledge, we are now also in a position to see how, in Kant’s understanding of the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge, the idea of a difference in “direction” of the sort that the “two directions of fit” model of the cognitive/desiderative distinction attempts to capture is preserved but is located in a different place. We might sum up the difference as Kant understands it by saying that whereas in the case of theoretical knowledge the actuality of the knowledge depends on the actuality of its object, in the case of practical knowledge the actuality of the object depends on the actuality of the knowledge. It is here, in respect of existential dependence, rather than with respect to “fit,” or conformity, that we find in Kant’s theoretical/practical distinction a difference in “direction.” When Kant acknowledges at the beginning of the first *Critique* “that all our knowledge begins with experience,” (B1) he is pointing out, with the empiricists, this relation of existential dependence in which theoretical knowledge stands to its object. But in the case of practical knowledge, we can assert the exact converse, namely, that all our experience (of the good) begins with knowledge, in that the experience of the object of practical knowledge (namely, the good) depends on the object’s actuality, which in turn depends on the object’s production by that practical knowledge.^{20*}

Notes

¹ Specifically, it is rational knowledge from concepts; as such, it is distinct from historical knowledge, which is not rational, and from mathematical knowledge, which is rational but not from concepts.

² Cf. *Intention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), §§32, 45–48. Anscombe attributes this conception of practical knowledge to Aquinas, though it is not clear from the text she cites (*Summa theologiae*, Ia IIae, Q3, art. 5, obj. 1) whether Aquinas has in view practical knowledge in her sense or in Kant's.

³ *A Treatise of Human Nature* II.iii.3.

⁴ This is not to say that the Humean dissociation rests simply on a crude failure to appreciate that while it is trivially true that the purely cognitive—i.e., the cognitive that is only cognitive and not also desiderative—cannot move us to act, this does not imply that the cognitive cannot also be desiderative. The Humean dissociation presumably stems at least in part from Hume's implicit reliance on a certain model of the cognitive/desiderative distinction, to be discussed in the paragraphs to follow.

⁵ The phrase 'direction of fit' seems to have been coined by John Searle (*Expression and Meaning* [Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 3), but as Searle notes, the distinction, or a version of it, can be found in Anscombe's *Intention*. The specific use of this phrase to articulate the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive representations is more recent; for some discussion, see Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 27ff., and Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 111ff.

⁶ Cf. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 38ff.

⁷ Though some interpreters, such as Henry Sidgwick, have taken Kant to be a rational intuitionist, John Rawls and others have argued convincingly against this interpretation. See Rawls, "Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy," in *Kant's Transcendental Deductions: The Three Critiques and the Opus postumum*, ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 95–98; see also his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 69–74, 235–47, and Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 28ff.

⁸ Except for page references to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which use the numbers of the first (A) and second (B) editions, all references to Kant's major writings and lectures are given by abbreviated title—*Anth* (*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*); *G* (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*); *KpV* (*Critique of Practical Reason*); *L* ([*Jäsche*] *Logic*); *MAN* (*Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*); *MS* (*Metaphysics of Morals*); *P* (*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*)—and by the page numbers of the appropriate volume of *Kant's gesammelte Schriften, herausgegeben von der Deutschen [formerly Königlich Preußischen] Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: de Gruyter [and predecessors], 1902–). Citations of Kant's other writings give, without abbreviated title, the volume and page from this edition. Translations are my own, though I have consulted the commonly used English translations.

⁹ The knowledge in question here is of course discursive, or conceptual. At one point Kant says judgment is "the mediate knowledge of an object," (A68/B93) thereby implicitly contrasting knowledge based in judgment with immediate knowledge of an object, knowledge that would be produced by an understanding that intuits. But for our discursive understanding "the immediate knowledge of the object...is impossible." (P 298–99)

¹⁰ Moreover, despite the fact that Kant, in introducing his Copernican way of thinking, contrasts it with the way of thinking hitherto followed in metaphysics, he cannot *himself* be supposing that it was from the start built into the traditional conception of theoretical knowledge that it conforms to its object, for it would be incoherent for him, were he supposing this, to propose that the Copernican way of thinking be followed in metaphysics. Kant must be supposing rather that the traditional conception of theoretical knowledge does not entail that such knowledge must conform to its object.

¹¹ The following brief account draws chiefly on Aristotle's discussion in *De anima* II.12 and III.4,

Metaphysics XII.9, and *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7.

¹² Cf. A547/B575, A802/B830, A840/B868.

¹³ *Intention* §33.

¹⁴ The purpose, namely, of seeking out the possible sources of theology in speculative reason.

¹⁵ Although the grammatical context suggests that the intended antecedent of this pronoun (*der*) is *Begriff* rather than *Gegenstand*, there is no reason to suppose that it is not part of Kant's understanding of theoretical knowledge that the object as well as its concept is given from elsewhere, as is in any case made explicit in the similar passage at *KpV* 46.

¹⁶ The grammatically incongruous use of "nonetheless" (*doch*) with "because" (*weil*) apparently stems from an attempt on Kant's part to say two things at once: *both* (1) that in making the object possible the representation is a priori determining with regard to its object *despite* the fact that it does not produce the object with respect to its existence, *and* (2) that *because* of this fact that it does not produce the object with respect to its existence, the representation is a priori determining with regard to its object in the other way he describes—namely, by making it possible to know anything as an object.

¹⁷ V., e.g., Kant's characterization of divine original intuition as one "through which even the existence of the object of intuition is given:" (B72) the implied contrast marked by the word "even" (*selbst*) is with form, as can be seen from his characterization of his transcendental idealism as merely formal rather than material, that is, as an idealism that concerns only the form, not the existence, of outer things (A491n/B519n). As the contrast with existence suggests, form is intimately connected with possibility: a representation that produces the form of its object is a condition of the object's possibility.

¹⁸ Since *both* of these species concern the relation of knowledge to the existence of its object, however, it seems that we could add to our characterization of knowledge in general that it must stand *in some relation or other* to the existence of its object.

¹⁹ I am ignoring here certain remarks in Anscombe's discussion that seem to suggest that she does not think that lack of agreement precludes the presence of practical knowledge.

²⁰ Thus, Kant says at one point that the ideas of practical reason "make experience (of the good) first possible," (A318/B375; cf. A807/B835) his point being that the ideas of practical reason make this experience possible not only by enabling us to recognize the good where it already exists, but also by moving us to bring it into existence and thereby making it available to be experienced in the first place.

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