The Concept of the Transcendental in Kant and Lonergan

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(Translated by Donald Buzzelli)

To speak of the "transcendental" today is to refer, like it or not, to Kant, and in particular to his "Critique of Pure Reason" (the "Critique"). In the Introduction to this work he speaks of a "transcendental knowledge", which is occupied "not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects is so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori." The term "transcendental" is so important for Kant that he called his thought "transcendental philosophy" (B 25). He took this term from the Scholastic tradition and gave it a meaning of his own.

1. The medieval Scholastics called the predicates of being as being, communissima or prima. These predicates were considered valid for any reality. In this they differed from categorial predicates, which were each valid only for a particular category, i.e., for one of the highest genera into which reality can be divided. Only later in that tradition did it become customary to call a being transcendens, insofar as it goes beyond every categorial limit, and to call the corresponding predicates transcendentalia. The number of such predicates was somewhat variable, but they always included unum, verum and bonum.

2. What led Kant to introduce the expression "transcendental knowledge" to refer to his new theory of knowledge? His reason is given at the beginning of the Introduction. Our knowledge is characterized by the features of universality and necessity, which can not be explained by the receptivity of sense. Sense indeed tells us that an individual thing is thus and so, but it does not tell us that this thing can exist identically in innumerable cases. Sense tells us that a thing exists and an event occurs, but it does not tell us that they must exist or occur. Therefore, Kant concludes, universality and necessity are sure signs of an a priori knowledge and are inseparable from one another (B 3f). "A priori knowledge" means an item of knowledge or an aspect of one that is "added" by our understanding. In this way Kant has already set up his conception of human knowing as a binary structure consisting of "intuitions" (Anschauungen) of sense and concepts of the understanding (cf. A 50-52).

2.1 A modern reader of the Critique will be surprised that Kant can pass so easily from features of knowledge that are not explainable in terms of sense to the affirmation that these features are added (B 1) by the understanding, in the sense that the understanding draws them out of itself. He never considers the hypothesis that the understanding can add these features because it is able to discover in the data of sense an intelligible component that the data bear but the senses cannot access. There are two reasons for this oversight: a) Kant conceives knowing simply as a dynamism of extroversion on the model of the faculty of sight. Knowing is "seeing" what stands in front of the subject as distinct from that subject. In other words, the known is an ob-jectum, a Gegen-stand. b) Kant does not acknowledge in the human understanding a capacity to intuit. The only intuition of which man is capable is that of the senses, which are all dynamisms of

extroversion. This means that in us only the sensibility is properly a cognitive faculty, since it alone is able to "see" and thus to build the bridge that brings the subject into a cognitive relation with the object.

But Kant is not an empiricist à la Hume. While he accepts the conception of sense as the only faculty that properly knows, he refuses to reduce human knowledge to sense alone. The whole "Critique" is an extremely acute effort to recover for the intellect its role in human knowing. The price of this undertaking is to make the intellect "the author of experience" (B 127) in the sense that it is the creator of a reality of its own—the reality of appearances—while at the same time recognizing the existence of a reality in itself (the "thing in itself") that is entirely unknowable to us. This is the quintessence of the "Critique" and is contained in nuce in the first two paragraphs of the Transcendental Aesthetic (B 33f). There Kant asserts that the sense "sees" while the understanding elaborates (cf. B 1) what the sense presents to it.

Two themes are present in the "Critique". There is the sensist theme connected with intuitionism: knowing is seeing, but the only seeing we are capable of is that of sense. There is the transcendental-idealist theme that attributes to the understanding the function of introducing into the "appearances" provided by sense an intelligible order, the order that science is gradually discovering. These two components are brought together as infrastructure and superstructure, but without constituting an intrinsic unity namely a unity in which the act of intellect takes over, but at the same time overcomes the sense cognitively and ontologically. The absence of the "missing link" between sense and understanding is at the origin of the obvious dualism that marks all of Kant's thought.

2.2 How did Kant think he could identify the a priori "additions" made by the understanding? Through the "transcendental knowledge" that is occupied with "the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori" (B 25). Does this mean through his so-called "turn to the subject"? Yes, but with a clarification or, rather, with a restriction. His reflection on the subject takes place from the standpoint of the object, about which Kant claims to know already both its qualifying features and the fact that these features arise out of the subject. This means that Kant will discern in the subject that, and only that, which he considers necessary in order to explain the object as thus conceived. Hence it is not decisive for Kant whether or not introspection succeeds in identifying in the subject the elements he postulates. They must be there anyway, since they characterize the object and cannot be derived from experience.

To the question of what the a priori elements are that the understanding possesses, Kant has a ready answer. For him the faculty of thinking with concepts and the faculty of judging are in reality identical (A 69). Now the task of understanding by means of concepts is to perform a "combination" (Verbindung) or "synthesis" of the manifold provided by sense (B § 15). Consequently, there will be as many of these syntheses as there are logical functions of our judgments. For Kant, in fact, a judgment consists in a relation (and hence a synthesis) of subject and predicate. Drawing on the tables of judgments that then were current in manuals of logic, and adapting them for his own purpose, Kant presents in the "Critique" the "complete" table (A 79f) of all our a priori syntheses and thus of all the basic intelligibles with which our

understanding is endowed. These are his twelve categories, among which are "totality" (multiplicity as unity) and "necessity". The first few pages of the Preface to the Second Edition contain an important discussion of the function of these intelligibles in constituting human knowledge.

Mathematicians since antiquity and students of nature in the modern era have entered upon "the sure path of science" thanks to a "revolution" in thinking (B xi): "They learned that reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own, … [and thus it] must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason's own determining" (B xiii, emphasis added). In this interpretation of science, which is repeated with various formulations, two directions can be distinguished. In the first direction, which we can call anticipatory-hypothetical, reason "seeks", "learns" and above all "asks". In the other direction, which we can call anticipatory-creative, reason "produces" intelligibility and "places it within" the manifold provided by sense. In the end, the second direction prevails, i.e., the thetic [constructive] interpretation of the activity of the understanding, which thereby annuls the experimental moment that Kant recognized as constitutive of modern science. That the Kantian a priori has this function is shown beyond any possible ambiguity in the section on the "Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding" that has the understanding "prescribing laws to nature" (B 159) so that the objects it knows are a mere "modification of our sensibility", "determinations of my identical self" (A 129).

The tension between these two ways of conceiving the a priori of the understanding is particularly manifest in the metaphor of the judge (B xiiif), which Kant uses to illustrate the procedures of science. The judge puts questions to the witnesses and requires them to answer. He is concerned with facts in the light of the code of law. His questions are meant to bring out from what the witnesses say elements that will allow him to frame a juridical hypothesis about what happened. In this sense he adds to the pure data of common-sense knowledge an intelligible that makes a juridical reality out of them. But this addition, at first, is only hypothetical. Only in the subsequent reflective-critical stage does he resolve for himself whether the meaning he has added is the discovery of a formal element that makes out of the data a juridical reality, or whether instead it is an intelligibility that is not adequate to what actually happened and therefore is not sufficient for an objectively grounded decision.

This example shows that the key element in knowing any reality is the question. Not just any question, but one that is relevant to that reality. A question arises out of a prior knowledge of the reality one is asking about, and thus it involves a cognitive a priori. But this a priori is only relative. The pre-knowledge that enables the person of common sense or the scientist to ask a question is that person's prior familiarity with a certain range of reality, or acquired through some ad hoc study. But how is it possible to acquire this pre-knowledge of a range of reality, if one learns only by asking questions relevant to that very question? There would seem to be an infinite regress, with every question requiring some pre-knowledge that is obtained by answering a previous question, which would preclude asking any questions at all. We will see this when we examine Lonergan's conception of the transcendental. Here let it suffice to observe that the question does not introduce anything into the reality to be known; on the contrary, it opens up for the questioner the possibility of grasping the reality as it is. The question aims at adding (!) an

intelligibility to the data provided by experience, thus providing the basis for posing the further critical question "Is it really so?" One thereby moves on to the judgment, in which the object that was experienced and then was understood is known for the first time in its status as a reality.

2.3 The other feature of our knowledge is necessity. What first strikes us is that Kant places necessity, together with reality (existence) and possibility, among the categories. In fact, as Kant recognizes, these three categories do not add any intelligibility to the content of experiece. Rather, they are predicates that determine the object not in itself, but in its relation to our faculty of knowing: more precisely, in its relation - for Kant - to the sensibility. This reveals in the clearest fashion Kant's sensualism, which is a philosophically ennobled form of the naïve realism according to which we know real things because we see them, touch them, etc. For Kant the possible, real, and necessary are three different ways in which the object of thought is connected (directly or mediately) with a possible, actual, or necessary experience. Necessary experience is illustrated by effects in relation to their cause and also by a (non-free) cause in relation to its effects.

3. Lonergan sets up his study of human knowledge without restrictions: he does not ask about the object of knowledge, much less about specific features of the object that are supposed to be already known. He asks simply: "What operations do we perform when we know?" Whether these operations have an object, what it is, and what sort of truth value it has, are questions he will be able to answer only after he has examined the individual operations in themselves. In brief, he takes as his object the subject as a subject that is conscious owing to the psychic acts of knowing that he is performing.

To reflect on one's own internal experience is to make use of an empirical method. This method is unlike that of natural science in that it starts out from our internal experience (consciousness) rather than from the external experience of the senses. It is therefore a generalized empirical method. With it, we are able to arrive at verifiable affirmations about our cognitive operations.

3.1 Objectifying the questions with which the intellectual phase of human knowing begins leads us to recognize that our cognitive dynamism operates in two distinct stages. The first is introduced by the question for understanding, "what is it?", directed at the content of experience. This question leads to an inquiry that aims to discover an intelligible content that the senses bring to us even though it is not within their power to know it.

This intelligible always consists in a relation among the data of experience. Here arises the fundamental distinction between common sense and science. Common sense considers the data in their relation to the knowing subject, as a being endowed with senses (color, sound, dimensions, etc.), or in their "existential" relevance. Science considers the data in their mutual interrelations in order to grasp the intelligibility immanent in them. In this respect the "synthesis" is confirmed that Kant speaks of in connection with our concepts (B § 15). But something much different must be said about a synthesis that supposedly already exists in the subject and is only waiting to be introduced into the object.

Inquiry is followed by understanding, i.e., grasping an intelligible in the sensible. Owing to what

it has understood the intellect is able to form (intelligently!) an inner word, the concept, and then also the outer spoken word. The concept expresses the intelligible grasped in the sensible together with that part or aspect of the sensible that is relevant to that intelligible (since it is the intelligible of a sensible!). The intellect can grasp an intelligible only in a concrete sensible provided by experience. But the concept that expresses it is by its nature universal. Just as the intelligible is found to be present in these data, it can be present in innumerable other cases. We speak of "a house", "a hydrogen atom", "a storm", etc. What we mean is not limited to the individual we are considering.

This applies to the experience of a schoolboy who a) grasps the intelligibility of the circle by fixing his attention on the figure his teacher has drawn on the blackboard (with the aid of the teacher's explanations!), and b) then pronounces the Euclidean definition of the circle, which is valid for any circle regardless of its size, the material it is made of, the time when it exists, etc.

In this way Lonergan has explained the universality of the concept without having recourse to any a priori synthesis. The act from which the concept emanates is the intelligere in sensibili that stands at the center of the Thomist theory of knowledge. Thomas took it over from the noein en tois phantasmasi of the De Anima (III, 6-8), by which Aristotle had overcome the impasse of the Platonic ideas. That act is so far from esoteric that St. Thomas could write: "Hoc quilibet in seipso experiri potest" (Summa theol. I, q.84, a.7)—anyone can experience it in himself.

In Kant's thought the act of understanding remained terra ignota. Historically, the reason for this is that he was in a conceptualist tradition that goes back at least to Duns Scotus. Scotus had denied the intelligere in phantasmate of Aristotle and had explained the universality of the concept in terms of an unconscious abstractive process performed by an intellect conceived as a kind of abstracting machine. Only after the concept has been formed does the properly conscious activity of the intellect begin for Scotus, and this consists in grasping the relation among concepts already present (intelligere in conceptibus). Kant took over Scotus's intuitionist conception of human knowing, but since he had dropped the Scotist tradition's idea of abstraction and did not recognize the act that connects the intellect with sense experience, he had recourse to the alternative of twelve a priori concepts.

The position taken in this paper regarding the concept can be summarized in the following statements. A priori concepts do not exist. The concept is one of the products of the cognitive process, resulting from the collaboration of sense and intellect. Every concept therefore is at once empirical and intellectual. Purely empirical concepts do not exist. They would be a mere flatus vocis.

3.2 The same introspective analysis also permits Lonergan to explain the necessity that characterizes our knowledge. But for Lonergan one cannot speak of necessity in knowledge without going beyond the stage of our cognitional structure that ends with the concept. Once we have arrived at a thought of a determinate object, our dynamism, being rational, poses a second question that startes the reflective-critical phase: "Is it (i.e., the object of experience) really so (i.e., the way I think it in the concept)?" The thought object expresses an intelligible that requires a corresponding sensible in experience, and we can know that that object exists only if

the corresponding sensible is there. The reflection that follows this second question is intended to find out whether at the level of experience all the data corresponding to the intelligible are there, and no data exist that could call into question the correctness of the understanding from which the concept proceeded. In other words, it is a matter of finding out whether the preceding intelligere is correct. To grasp that correctness is to grasp the reason (the so-called evidence) that permits our mind to reply with a "yes", "est", to its critical question and so to affirm (to posit) unconditionally what previously it only thought.

But an unconditioned affirmation requires unconditioned grounds. That is what the reflective intellect grasps. The conditioned is the object thought inasmuch as it is a finite intelligible. The conditions are the data of experience inasmuch as these data actually stand in the relation expressed by that intelligible. They thereby satisfy, within the structure of reflection, the conditions of that conditioned. The conditioned thus is equivalent to a virtually unconditioned that is capable of justifying the judgment "It is so". But the grounded affirmation that a thing is, is the same as knowledge that the thing exists. The being of the affirmation (intentional being) is the means by which we attain knowledge of the being of things (real being). Ens iudicio vero cognoscitur.

From this analysis of the third phase in the structure of the cognitive process we see that the (direct or indirect) contribution of experience is indispensable if we are to know being. This indispensability is not to be taken in the sense of Kantian sensism, but because experience within reflection fulfils the function of satisfying the conditions of the conditioned. The same analysis also permits us to clarify what kind of necessity characterizes our knowledge. It is not absolute necessity, but the necessity of the contingent, i.e., of that which is not being itself but which, as intelligible, can exist and in fact does exist. It is the necessity of contingent being.

3.3 There is a further aspect of Kant's "transcendental knowledge" that deserves attention. The part of the "Critique" that deals with the intellectual phase of knowledge is titled the "Transcendental Logic". Indeed, the reflections he makes there do not go beyond the limits of logic. Logic is concerned with formal relations within knowledge, concentrating on the end products of the cognitive activity that moves from experience to the concept. The adjective transcendental, in turn, means that these formal elements of knowledge are constitutive of the object. The performative aspect of our intentionality, which starts out from a question, is left out of an inquiry that centers on the contents that enter into an object. Contents such as the intuitions of the sensibility, the categories of the understanding, up to the "I think", the synthetic-originary unity of apperception (B 131-135) that is the highest point of reference in the whole logical mechanism devised to explain the formal aspects of "reality".

Formulating the issue in these logical terms hindered Kant from recognizing the contradiction that undermines his entire theory of knowledge With his "Critique" he is telling the reader that we do not know reality, but only the appearance of something unknown. Such a thesis does not imply any contradiction. But a contradiction comes to light as soon as someone (Kant!) asserts this conception of knowledge. He is saying that really and truly we do not know what really and truly is so. This is a contradiction between the content of the assertion and the performance (Vollzug) of that same assertion. The transcendental conditions of possibility within

transcendental logic do not transcend that logic. It seems entirely justified to say that Kant's turn to the subject stopped halfway: it was the turn to a subject gravely mutilated in its intelligent and rational subjectivity.

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