

On Being a Self: The Individuality of Possibility and the Possibility of Individuality

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Part of Kant's reason for writing the first *Critique* is to show the limits of theoretical reason; one of these limits is its inability to experience transcendence, to cognize supersensible objects, to intuit the sublime. But Kant doesn't thereby want to make these experiences impossible—indeed, part of his reason for writing the second and third *Critiques*, along with such works as *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, is to show how such experiences are possible. Kant locates the possibility of transcendence within his discussions of practical reason: Transcendence, impossible from a speculative point of view, becomes possible from a practical point of view. It is Kant's analysis into this possibility that allows him to link the two halves of his dualistic self, and shows that transcendence, far from being impossible, is necessary to individuate a self.¹

¹ 8:142–43; see also A640/B668–A642/B670. References to Kant's works will be to the page numbers in the *Akademie* Edition. References with A or B followed by a page number indicate references to the first *Critique*; references beginning with the numeral 4 are to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, those with 8 are to "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" and those with 9 are to the *Jäsche Logic*. Both the second and third *Critiques* are in volume 5 of the *Akademie* Edition, so references to these works will also be indicated by CR and CJ, respectively.

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I

Kant assumes that it might be possible to have an experience of the divine:

If I come across an immediate intuition of such kind that nature...could not provide that intuition, then a concept of God must serve to gauge whether this appearance agrees with all the characteristics required for a Deity.... Rational faith must come first, and then certain appearances or disclosures could...provide the occasion for investigating whether we are warranted in taking what speaks...to us to be a Deity.²

Even in the first *Critique*, Kant makes it clear that practical reason is capable of intuiting the supersensible: “There is an absolutely necessary practical use of pure reason (the moral use), in which reason unavoidably extends itself beyond the boundaries of sensibility.”³

Jean-Luc Marion also argues for the possibility of our experience of transcendence, but tries to locate that possibility within speculative reason. Marion calls this experience a “saturated phenomenon,” a phenomenon not bound by the normal phenomenological limitations. According to Marion, Husserl’s “principle of all principles” is too restrictive to allow for supersensible or saturated phenomena.⁴ Instead of ignoring the limits of the Husserlian principle, Marion wishes to examine the possibility of a phenomenon at the borders of these limits. Thus, the possibility of a saturated phenomenon might allow a new analysis of possibility and so question some of the foundations of phenomenology.

Marion suggests that such a saturated phenomenon sheds light above all on possibility:

By subjecting the phenomenon to the jurisdiction of possibility, philosophy in fact brings fully to light its own definition of naked possi-

All italics are in the original.

² 8:142-43.

³ Bxxv. Kant uses the term transcendent because such experiences transcend speculative reason: “In a word, these three propositions [freedom of the will, immortality of the soul, and existence of God] always remain transcendent for speculative reason....Their importance must really concern only the *practical*” (A799/B827-A800/B828).

bility. The question concerning the possibility of the phenomenon implies the question of the phenomenon of possibility.⁵

Marion begins with a definition of ‘possibility’ he gets from Kant: “Whatever agrees with the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with intuition and concepts) is *possible*.”⁶ Marion focuses on formal adherence to the concepts and to intuition, and not, thereby, intuition itself. He concludes his discussion with his working definition of ‘possibility’, one he seems to hold as a paraphrase of Kant: “Any phenomenon is possible that grants itself to the finitude of the power of knowing and its requirements.”⁷ But in this definition, Marion seems to ignore important points of Kant’s analysis of possibility.

For Kant, as for Marion, possibility is determined by the formal conditions of experience. But for Marion, these conditions are limited solely to the concepts and to intuition, where for Kant the formal conditions include both the “theoretical” sources (intuition and concepts) and the “practical” sources (the moral law). In his preface to the second edition, he clarifies that theoretical reason is not uniquely constitutive of possibility:

To cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility.... [And] in order to ascribe [real possibility] to such a concept...something more is required. This “more,” however, need not be sought in theoretical sources of cognition; it may also lie in practical ones.⁸

By trying to locate experience of the supersensible within theoretical possibility, Marion seems doomed to failure. Kant says as much repeatedly: “All attempts of a merely speculative use of reason in regard to theology are entirely fruitless and by their internal constitution null and

⁴ This principle limits the givenness of the phenomenon by making it reducible to the *I* and always inscribed within a horizon of meaning.

⁵ Marion 177.

⁶ A218/B265; see Marion 177–78.

⁷ Marion 178.

⁸ Bxxvi. Likewise, the *Jäsche Logic* states, “We have...certain cognitions, and in fact completely *a priori*, in practical laws, but these are grounded on a supersensible principle...and in fact in *us ourselves*, as a principle of practical reason” (9:68n). Elsewhere Kant withholds the name ‘cognition’

nugatory.”⁹ But Marion’s failure to acknowledge Kantian practical possibility is not extraordinary. Since Kant’s most extended philosophical treatments of possibility are within his *Critique* of speculative reason, most of his discussions of possibility focus on speculative possibility.¹⁰ Paul Guyer comes close to recognizing the importance of practical possibility, drawing an “analogy” between the logical/real distinction and Kant’s proof for the possibility of the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.¹¹

In the second *Critique*, Kant seems unclear how to talk about practical possibility, making some confusing and seemingly contradictory assertions. For example, in a parenthetical remark meant to clarify the meaning of ‘postulate of pure practical reason’, Kant says, “By [this] I understand a *theoretical* proposition, though not one demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law.”¹² A few pages later, Kant seems to distinguish speculative reason from theoretical reason, though he elsewhere uses the terms synonymously:

Because practical reason unavoidably requires the [postulates of practical reason, which are the existence of freedom, immortality, and God]...theoretical reason is justified in assuming them. But this extension of theoretical reason is no extension of speculation, that is, no positive use can be made of it for *theoretical purposes*.... Hence this disclosure does not help us in the least for speculative purposes, although with respect to the practical use of pure reason it does help us to extend this cognition of ours.¹³

What Kant means when he distinguishes an “extension of theoretical reason” from an “extension of speculation” is unclear, for he immediately again uses the terms as synonymous. It may be that he is here confused; certainly a species of pure reason is justified in assuming the practical postulates, but not pure theoretical (or speculative) reason. Hence he is saying that pure reason must assume the practical postulates,

from practical reason: “*Rational faith*, which rests on a need of reason’s use with a *practical* intent...is not inferior in degree to knowing, even though it is completely different from it in kind” (8:141).

⁹ A636/B664.

¹⁰ See particularly A218/B266–A224/B272.

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but this extension of pure reason is not an extension of theoretical reason; no use can be made for theoretical purposes, though for practical purposes the postulates are essential.

Kant concisely describes “*practical* cognition of reason” as “*making* the object *actual*.”¹⁴ That the objects must be made actual implies that they are only practically possible. For example, the kingdom of ends “is a practical idea for the sake of bringing about...that which does not exist but which can become real by means of our conduct.”¹⁵

Kant divides practical from speculative reason, but seems uncomfortable with the gap he thus creates. He needs practical possibility in his discussions of speculative possibility, and he often depends on speculative possibility in his practical proofs. One of the purposes of the third *Critique* is to connect speculative and practical reason through teleological judgment. Regardless of the success of this argument, practical and speculative reason are connected through Kant’s conception of the self and personal identity. This makes room for some rich investigations into what it means to be a self.

II

With this discussion of practical reason, Kant acknowledges the tradition of philosophical possibility begun by Aristotle. For Aristotle, possibility (*dynamis*) is essentially active: its primary meaning is “a source of movement or change [*kinesis*],”¹⁶ and it is derived from the word *dynasthai* (“being able”). Aristotle is the first to see the connection between being and possibility: “Being is...distinguished in respect of possibility and actuality [*energeia*].”¹⁷

Aristotle’s *dynamis* is a complex notion; he acknowledges that

¹¹ Guyer 180–84.

¹² CR 5:122.

¹³ CR 5:134–35. Commenting on this passage, Guyer says, “The unexpected concession he grants with one hand is immediately taken back with the other” (338n).

¹⁴ Bx.

¹⁵ 4:437n.

¹⁶ 1019a15.

“*dynamis* and *dynasthai* have several senses.”¹⁸ Graham identifies three: *dynamis*-action (DA), *dynamis*-power (DP), and *dynamis*-substance (DS).¹⁹ Aristotle himself often conflates DA and DP,²⁰ and the distinction is not important to our discussion here.

But Aristotle seems to think *dynamis* in this sense to be somewhat philosophically uninteresting: “Let us first explain *dynamis* in the strictest sense, which is, however, not the most useful for our present purpose. For *dynamis* and actuality extend beyond the cases that involve a reference to *kinesis*.”²¹ Aristotle equates *dynamis* (DS) with matter and actuality with substance or form.²² Thus he maps his early ontology of the categories onto a new metaphysics of possibility and actuality,²³ making actuality identical with being.²⁴ This leads him to say that “actuality is prior to possibility [*dynamis*].”²⁵

Like Aristotle, Heidegger focuses on active possibility, but unlike Aristotle he affirms that “higher than actuality stands *possibility*.”²⁶ Like Kant, he recognizes logical possibility, but dismisses it as “empty.” He likewise dismisses “modal possibility,” which he characterizes as “contingency of something objectively present,” and defines as “what is *not yet* real and *not always* necessary.”²⁷ In this sense, according to Heidegger, possibility is really a form of actuality; thus, as with logical possibility, this is not the primary sense. Heidegger is most concerned with possibility as an existential: “possibility as an existential is the most primordial and the ultimate positive ontological determination of Dasein.”²⁸ Being is identified with possi-

¹⁷ 1045b34–36, translation altered. Plato presents, in the mouth of the Stranger in the Sophist, the following definition of being: “I offer it as a definition of beings [*ta onta*] that they are possibility [*dynamis*], and nothing else” (247e4, translation altered). But it is controversial whether this is actually a definition that either the Stranger or Plato would accept (see Owen 229–30n).

¹⁸ 1046a4.

¹⁹ See Graham 183, 199–200. Ross counts five in his translation of Aristotle’s lexicon in *Metaphysics* v (1019a15–33). Aristotle, however, sees some of these as “equivocal” (1046a6). Ross reduces the five definitions to two primary senses (see Graham 200). It is probably Ross’s identification of DA and DP that leads him to translate *dynamis* as “potency.”

²⁰ See Graham 205.

²¹ 1045b37–1046a3.

²² See 1050b2.

²³ This is what, according to Graham, causes the inconsistencies of *Metaphysics* vii. See Graham 207ff.

²⁴ Cf. 1028b3, 1050b2.

²⁵ 1049b5, translation altered.

bility: “Dasein is not something objectively present which then has as an addition the ability to do something, but is rather primarily being-possible. Dasein is always what it can be and how it is its possibility.”²⁹

Kantian practical possibility is thus like Heidegger’s existential possibility and Aristotle’s *dynamis-A* in that it is essentially active. But the focus of the first Critique is on speculative possibility, the brand of possibility more suited to Kant’s epistemological and metaphysical claims, and, it seems, to Marion’s phenomenology. These two concepts of possibility might seem almost completely unrelated—as separate, in fact, as metaphysics and epistemology are from ethics and aesthetics. Surely we equivocate in confusing the possibility of an object with the possibility of an action. Surely, that is, when I say, “It is possible for me to go to the store” (which may involve notions of free will), I use possibility in a different sense than when I say, “A three-sided plane figure is possible” (which involves only appearances).

Many philosophers, including Kant, are uncomfortable with this division. Guyer sees the practical postulates as “part of the moral psychology that Kant was developing in all the major works of his final decade of philosophical activity.”³⁰ Marion likewise may be relying on the slogan of his predecessor Emmanuel Lévinas that ethics precedes metaphysics.

While Kant would certainly not say that ontology is reducible to ethics, his metaphysics is motivated by his concern for morality: “I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*; [because] the dogmatism of metaphysics... is the true source of all unbelief conflicting with morality.”³¹ The relationship between practical and speculative possibility, as with practical and speculative reason, is complex, but essential to make this connection between metaphysics (of nature) and morality.

²⁶ Heidegger 38. References to *Being and Time* refer to the page numbers in the original German edition. I use Stambaugh’s translation throughout, but do not hyphenate Dasein.

²⁷ Heidegger 143. Kant characterizes possibility as “the synthesis of various representations with the conditions of time in general,” and necessity as “the existence of an object at all times” (B184/A144–B184/A145).

²⁸ Heidegger 143–44. Heidegger contrasts the term existential with category: “We shall call the characteristics of being of Dasein *existentials*. They are to be sharply delimited from the determi-

III

For Kant, possibility is always individual. Kant speaks of “the *sum total of all possibility*,” but then asserts that this is only an “*ideal* of pure reason.”³² Possibility must be individual—according to Kant, for example, light and darkness are not possibilities to a blind person.³³ Even if the categories are universal (as Kant claims), experience and (thus) intuition are not. Likewise with practical reason: though the moral law is the same for everyone, adherence to the moral law is not so universal. This is according to the very nature of ethics, insofar as it treats not how people act but how they ought to act. Thus, according to both the theoretical and practical conditions for cognition, possibility is not universal but individual.

Marion quotes part of a passage in which Kant acknowledges the individual nature of possibility. The full quotation is as follows: “The categories of modality [including possibility] have this peculiarity: as a determination of the object they do not augment the concept to which they are ascribed in the least, but rather express only the relation to the faculty of cognition.”³⁴ This language is similar to that which Kant uses in his argument that being is not a predicate: “Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing.”³⁵ Thus possibility is, like being, not a predicate—that is, not the property of an object or phenomenon.

Any attribute can serve as a logical predicate if a complete and exclusive list can be constructed of its membership. This is why logical possibility cannot be a predicate. As Cantor proved, such a set would have to be both larger (have greater cardinality) and smaller than its power set. So no set of all logical possibilities can be constructed, as the membership of such a set is indeterminate.

Real speculative possibility fails to be a determinate set for quite another reason. Because possibility is based on experience, the list of possibilities cannot be complete as long as one could have further experi-

nations of being of those beings unlike Dasein which we call *categories*” (44). Thus, possibility as an existential means possibility defined otherwise than in terms of the categories (as is Kantian speculative possibility).

²⁹ Heidegger 143.

³⁰ Guyer 336–37.

ences. Here the Kantian and Heideggerian concepts of possibility merge, since, according to Heidegger, the items in a determinate list of possibilities are no longer real possibilities, but “something objectively present.”³⁶ Thus, to make a determinate set of possibilities is just to make possibility impossible, to deny there is real possibility.

For example, if I could list all the really possible things that could happen to me tomorrow, I would have to be omniscient. I might be able to list all the things I am likely to do (go to the grocery store, write a philosophy paper, eat pancakes), but there are bound to be (at least) a few things I miss. The list will be (at least countably) infinite—it is certainly within the limits of real possibility for me to be hit, for example, by any of the asteroids in the universe. But if I really am omniscient, then I will know what will happen to me tomorrow. There really won’t be any possibilities: just one as-yet unrealized actuality. That is, I would have no real possibility.

Thus, even on a purely logical analysis, Kantian speculative possibility intersects active, practical possibility. My ability to experience objects depends on the indeterminacy of my being, which relates to my ability to act. One cannot speak of universal possibility, only of the possibility of an individual self. An individual is thus surrounded by a halo of possibility, a halo which, in defining the individual’s possibilities, defines the individual.

Individuation does not occur merely on the basis of the transcendental ego—the ego is necessary but not sufficient for the creation of individuals. Kant argues that the move by which we empirically determine the existence of external objects is also the move by which we empirically determine the existence of an enduring self: “The determination of my existence in time is possible only by means of the existence of actual things that I perceive outside myself.”³⁷ That is, the self is determined empirically and in relation to the external world.

This is the thrust of Kant’s distinction between inner sense and apperception—inner sense is a kind of sensibility and hence a form of intuition: “Through inner sense we intuit ourselves only as we are internally affected by *our selves*, i.e., as far as inner intuition is concerned we cognize our own subject only as appearance but not in accordance with what it is

³¹ Bxxx.

in itself.”³⁸ Kant sees that we cannot observe our inner state without in the same act changing our state—when I pause to examine the content of my thoughts, that act in itself changes the content of my thoughts, at least by introducing that examination among my thoughts. Through the transcendental unity of apperception, on the other hand, “I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself [as with inner sense], nor as I am in myself, but only *that* I am.”³⁹ Apperception involves the recognition of persistence of the subject through changes in the object; it recognizes the self as a self only because it is essentially other than the objects of the world: “The consciousness of my own existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of other things outside me.”⁴⁰

This conclusion is similar to one of the major points of Marion’s argument. Marion begins by investigating the possibility of an object that does not comply with Kant’s requirements of speculative possibility—that the object agree with the concepts and intuition.⁴¹ He acknowledges that within the scope of mathematics and physics, an object that does not meet these requirements would truly be impossible: “This phenomenon quite simply would not appear; or better, there would not be any phenomenon at all.”⁴² He defines the saturated phenomenon as identical with the “aesthetic idea” of Kant’s third *Critique*: “an intuition... for which an adequate concept can never be found.”⁴³ Just as Kant speaks of the sublime as being absolute,⁴⁴ Marion says, “Intuitive saturation, precisely inasmuch as it is...absolute (unconditioned), imposes itself in the capacity of a phenomenon that is exceptional by excess, not by defect.”⁴⁵ If a saturated phenomenon were to appear, it would not be reducible to an object. Conversely, if there is an appearance that is not objectifiable, that

³² A573/B601–A574/B602.

³³ A575/B603.

³⁴ A219/B266. Insofar as intuition forms part of it, the faculty of cognition is individual. Thus, the possibility of, say, an object comes from its having a certain relation to an individual’s categories and intuition.

³⁵ A598/B626.

³⁶ Heidegger 143.

³⁷ B275–76.

³⁸ B156.

³⁹ B157.

⁴⁰ B276.

appearance is a saturated phenomenon.

The excess of intuition prohibits the self from mastering the appearance, from reducing it to concepts. Because of this, Marion says, “Far from being able to constitute this phenomenon, the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it.”⁴⁶ That is, “It becomes a *me* rather than an *I*.”⁴⁷ The self is more than a transcendental ego; it is always also an immanent *me*. But this is a familiar point: in one sense it is nothing more than the idea that the self is both noumenal and phenomenal, an idea in which Kant locates his discussion of free will.

In another sense, however, Marion’s claim may be new. He seems to ignore the necessarily individual nature of possibility, asking only if a saturated phenomenon is possible, never asking for whom it might be possible.⁴⁸ But, since it is the saturated phenomenon that constitutes the *I*, endowing a transcendental ego with the power of possibility, of change, and hence of selfhood, this saturated phenomenon must by definition appear within every halo of possibility. Marion does not, in the end, ignore Kant’s discussion of the individual nature of possibility, but is only concerned with what is by definition within the halo of possibility of every individual—that without which there are no individuals.

Guyer also resolves the difficulties in Kant’s discussions of the possibility of the practical postulates on Kant’s conception of the self:

The possibility of believing in the actual existence of theoretically indemonstrable conditions... lie[s] at the deepest level of the dualistic conception of human nature that underlies Kant’s moral psychology.... The postulates of pure practical reason, like the aesthetic experience of beauty as a symbol of the morally good, are products of human psychology that can be used by the moral will.⁴⁹

By “dualistic conception of human nature,” Guyer means primarily the idea that we are all both sensible and rational beings, and this dualism

⁴¹ Marion, of course, does not distinguish speculative and practical possibility.

⁴² Marion 209. Marion goes on to say that, instead of a phenomenon, there would be an “objectless perceptive aberration.” This, however, cannot be what he really means, as it assumes that all intuitions are perceptive (which is not the case with mathematical objects, those which Marion calls “poor” phenomena). It also begs the question of appearance: nothing, not even an aberration, appears with a truly impossible object. To assume there is an aberration is already to assume there is something which is not reducible to an object.

forces reason to “nurture every means to the performance of our duty that sensibility affords, such as the natural feelings of beauty and the sublime.”⁵⁰ It is experience of the beautiful and the sublime that unite the two halves of the self, in which the philosophical notions of possibility also merge.

The saturated phenomenon can only be a condition of individuation if it is not prohibitively uncommon. Marion thus wants to reverse what he sees as Kant’s giving “privilege” to “logical and mathematical phenomena,” claiming, “it is not self-evident that this marginal poverty could serve as a paradigm for phenomenality as a whole.”⁵¹ Instead, he asserts,

The saturated phenomenon must not be understood as a limit case, an exceptional, vaguely irrational, in short, a “mystical,” case of phenomenality. On the contrary, it indicates the coherent and conceptual completion of the most operative definition of the phenomenon.... And—we insist on this—here it is purely and simply a matter of the phenomenon taken in its fullest meaning.⁵²

Marion thus wants to take the saturated phenomenon as the most basic experience. It is the saturated phenomena that give meaning to our everyday experiences, not the reverse.

I have consciousness of myself as an individual only back as far as my earliest memories. Marion classifies “pure historical [that is, memorable] events” as the first type of saturated phenomenon.⁵³ Insofar as an experience is remembered, it is not fully objectified; it is thus by definition saturated. My dawning consciousness as a child coincided with my acquisition of concepts and thus experiences that transcended those concepts. These early transcendent experiences, and all that have followed, together make me who I am.

In addition to pure historical events, Marion calls Descartes’s idea of infinity by the name of the saturated phenomenon. He also cites Kant’s notion of the sublime and adds experiences of art, love, and the divine to the list of saturated phenomena.⁵⁴ These experiences endow an individual with a halo of possibility, and thus with selfhood. As Kant says,

⁴³ *CJ* 5:342; see Marion 195–96.

⁴⁴ *CJ* 5:248.

⁴⁵ Marion 209.

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“True sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person.”⁵⁵

The purpose of practical reason is to make the possible actual. Thus, whereas inner sense only cognizes the self as appearance, apperception, which is direct intuition of the self, “self-actively” makes the self actual.⁵⁶ Both practical and speculative reason are involved in the identity of the self.

Kant’s division of speculative from practical possibility leads to several problems that he can only resolve by combining the two notions. But the division goes right to the heart of Kantian dualism, and is thus only resolved by the union of the dualism of the self. It is among Kant’s central concerns in his work on ethics, aesthetics, and politics near the end of his life to examine what it is to be a self and thus how to reconcile theoretical and practical reason.

⁴⁶ Marion 210.

⁴⁷ Marion 211.

⁴⁸ Kant, on the other hand, is very concerned with this individuality: “A pure rational faith is

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therefore the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orients himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects; but a human being who has common but (morally) healthy reason can mark out his path" (8:142).

⁴⁹ Guyer 336.

⁵⁰ Guyer 366.

⁵¹ Marion 189.

⁵² Marion 212-13.

⁵³ Marion 215.

⁵⁴ Marion 213-15.

⁵⁵ *CJ* 5:256.

⁵⁶ B68.

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