

Two Epistemic Directions of Fit

Boris Hennig, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

*Abridged version, to be presented at the J.L. Austin Centenary Conference, Lancaster 2011.*¹

1. Introduction

Kant claims that synthetic a priori knowledge is possible because the objects of our knowledge conform to our cognition rather than vice versa. When something conforms to something else, the reason is often that the second has acted on the first, or that someone has taken the second as a pattern for making or manipulating the first. That an object conforms to our cognition might therefore be taken to mean that our cognition shapes or manipulates its objects. If this were true, however, our cognition would be an instance of what has traditionally been called *practical knowledge*. It would be the cause of what it understands, or at least the cause of the form of what it understands. I take it that when Kant says that objects conform to our cognition, he does not want to imply that our cognition of them is practical in this sense. I therefore ask how cognition can determine the form of its object without creating or altering it in any sense. In order to answer this question, I will employ Austin's distinction between two *directions of fit*.

2. Archetypes and Ectypes

In his letter to Herz of February 21st, 1772, Kant considers the idea that a representation may relate to its object in one of the following two ways: (1) such that the object causes the representation or (2) vice versa, such that the representation causes the object. Kant here appeals to what has been called

¹ An extended version will constitute Chapter 2 my book, *The Four Causes*.

exemplary causation.² That A is an exemplary cause of B means that A is a paradigm of which B is a copy. I adopt Kant's terminology and call the paradigm an *archetype* and its copy an *ectype*.³

In his letter to Herz, Kant thus asks whether representations relate to their objects as archetypes relate to ectypes. The hard problem is how *spontaneous cognitive acts* can represent objects. We seem to have the choice between the following two scenarios.

(1) First, our spontaneous cognitive acts could represent their objects by being mere ectypes of them. Then, however, they would represent their objects only insofar as they (the acts) are passive and not spontaneous. Everything in them that represents the object would also passively derive from it, and everything that goes beyond what derives from the object would be an additional, non-representing, and possibly distorting element.

Now, as Kant argues, our sensory experience necessarily involves an activity of the mind; if not judging, then at least what he calls *synthesis*, which is an act of going through and holding together the manifold of sensory impressions (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 103). If the activity of our mind were a non-representing and thus possibly distorting element, then all experience would potentially be distorted by it. There would be no reason why it should not differ arbitrarily in different subjects, and this would lead to relativism (cf. B 168).

(2) Alternatively, our spontaneous acts might be archetypes, of which their objects are ectypes. However, ectypes are copies of archetypes, and they represent their archetypes by conforming to them. Therefore, if the objects

² Johannes Micraelius writes: "*Exemplaris causa* dicitur, quae in mente artificis est efformata, & ad quam imago in re ipsa exprimitur. *Exemplar* est causa imaginis: sed *imago* est signum repraesentans suum exemplarum. Correspondentia autem imaginis & exemplaris dicitur similitudo" (*Lexicon Philosophicum*, Jena 1653, p. 484, s.v. "exemplar").

³ According to Micraelius, the archetype of a thing may also be a disposition in the mind of its maker that guides the process of its production: "*Archetypum* igitur est architecti dispositio, quam mente concipit, & ad quam aedificium exstruendum est" (p. 161-2, s. v. "archetypus").

were ectypes of our spontaneous cognitive acts, the objects would be representations of these acts and not vice versa. Further, with regard to the object of our theoretical knowledge, the world, there is only one intellect that could possibly qualify as archetypical, and this is the intellect of its creator. For the creator of the world, knowing and creating the world are the same. The creator's knowledge of the world, however, would be *practical knowledge*, and the problem is to explain how theoretical knowledge can be spontaneous.

Kant cannot accept any of these two scenarios. We cannot solve the problem of how our spontaneous cognitive acts can be cognitions of objects by asserting that instead of being *spontaneous* acts they are merely *passive* reactions to objects. Nor can we do this by asserting that instead of being *cognitions*, they are *makings or shapings* of objects. In his letter to Herz, Kant concludes that with respect to the objects of theoretical cognition, the human intellect is neither archetypical, since it does not create its own object, nor ectypical, since it is not merely passive.

But what else can it be? Is there any way in which something may stand in a representational relation to something else, other than being its archetype or its ectype? In other words, how can a concept determine the features of its object, so that the object must conform to it and that the concept still (cognitively) represents this object? With this question in mind I turn to Austin.

3. How To Talk

In *How to Talk*,⁴ Austin asks the following question: What is the difference between *calling* something an F and *describing* it as an F? Austin proposes to capture this distinction by considering a simple world that contains a number of labeled items, each of which are of exactly one type. The language that he introduces within his model only allows for sentences of the form

The item labeled 'A' is of type T.

⁴ *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford 1979.

These sentences can be used in four different ways, which are best explained by distinguishing different kinds of questions to which they may serve as an answer. In one set of cases, we imagine that someone is confronted with an item labeled 'A' and is asked one of the following two questions:

- (1) (a) Is A of type T?
- (b) Is type T the type of which A is an instance?

The first question (1a) is a question about item A, which is given; the second question (1b) is a question about type T, which is not given.

In a second set of cases, someone is provided with a type description and then asked to identify an item that is an instance of this type. This kind of question may also take two different forms:

- (2) (a) Is any of the available items an instance of type T?
- (b) Is type T instantiated by any of the available items?

Again, the first of these questions (2a) is about any one of the available items, but it is not specified which one; and the second (2b) is about the type, which is specified. In all four cases, the answer may have the form:

A is of type T.

But in each case this statement has a slightly different meaning. The differences between (a) and (b) are admittedly rather subtle. It is clear that in any case, stating whether A is of type T involves two capacities: (i) to identify a particular item as an instance of a type, and (ii) to understand what it takes, in general, to be an instance of this type. Austin's point is that these two

capacities are to some extent independent of each other. One of them engages knowledge about a particular item, whereas the other engages knowledge about a type of items. For instance, one may be able to correctly describe an item A without knowing of a given type whether A falls under it, and one might be able to state the criteria for instantiating a type T without being able to identify a particular item that satisfies them.

Questions (1a) and (2a) assume that knowledge about the type T is already available, and the task is to apply this knowledge to a particular item. In (1b) and (2b), it is assumed that the features of the relevant items are already known, and the task is to decide which type would fit the bill. The distinction between (a) and (b), which Austin describes in terms of the “onus of match,” is independent of the question whether the item (1) or the type (2) is given.

I am here interested in the contrast concerning what is given and what is asked for, that is, the distinction between (1) and (2). This distinction is the one that Austin draws in terms of the “direction of fit.” For my present purposes, I consider only two of the four ways in which the sentence “Item A is of type T” may be used in Austin’s model:

- (1a) *Stating*: Given an item A, to answer the question about this item as to what its type is.
- (2a) *Casting*: Given a type T, to answer the question about any of the available items as to whether they fall under it.

In an act of *stating*, the question that is answered is a question about what is given (the item), and the direction of fit is *type to item*. *Casting* provides an answer to a question about what is not given (which is, again, the item), and the direction of fit is *item to type*.

It should be clear that this distinction, between casting and stating, has nothing to do with a distinction between beliefs and desires, or assertions and expressions of intention. In casting, we do not express a desire that A be of

type T or an intention to bring this about.⁵

4. Sellarsian Sentences

Let me now extend Austin's model in a first step, by taking into account that items may not only be classified as instances of certain types but also furnished with properties. In order to do this, we need to consider a world in which items are of types and have properties, and introduce more complex sentences of the following form:

Item A of type T is P.

These more complex sentences may be broken down into two parts, one of which is exactly of the form Austin describes:

- (i) Item A is of type T,
- (ii) Item A has property P.

I treat property attributions as analogous to type attributions. That is, by uttering a sentence of the form "Item A has property P," we may either *state* that the item has property P or *cast* an item as having property P. Since there are four different ways of relating types to items and four ways of relating properties to items, sentences of the form "Item A of type T is P" may in theory be understood in sixteen different ways (some of which may not make any sense). I consider only the following case:

Item A, which is *cast* as a T, is *stated* to be P.

⁵ When Austin speaks of "producing" an item that fits a description (*How to Talk*, p. 141), he does not literally mean that such an item is made. He uses the verb "produce" in the sense of "coming up with something."

In this first extension of Austin's model, casting and stating do not any longer refer to self-contained speech acts but to parts of speech acts. I speak of the casting part (or term) and the stating part (or term) of an assertion.

It is now time to gradually return to Kant. On my way back, I will further modify Austin's model and drop the assumption that all items are labeled. When we cast an item as a T, we do not answer the question whether an item labeled 'A' fits type T, but rather the question whether a so far unspecified item fits this type. We do not cast item A as a T; we simply cast some T. Dropping the labels is a decisive step away from Austin. In Austin's original model, items are accessible independently of how they are cast, namely by means of their labels, and acts of casting them are acts of bringing these labeled items under a given concept. There is no question how we identify items in the first place. By dropping the label, I turn the casting part into that part of a sentence by which the object is first brought into view.

The sentences I am concerned with now have the following form:

This T (*casting*) is P (*stating*).

I call them *Sellarsian sentences* because they have the general form

This such is so-and-so.

5. Affection and Function

According to Kant, judgments are either *complex* and consist of further judgments or they are *categorical*. All categorical judgments involve two predicates that perform different functions. Kant says that in a (singular) categorical judgment of the form "S is P" we compare two predicates, one of which stands for a logical subject, the other for a logical predicate (*Reflexion* 4634, *Akademie Ausgabe* XVII, p. 616-7). More specifically, an object is introduced by means of a substance concept, which is then related to a logical

predicate that stands for a property. Since the substance concept introduces the object that is then determined by the predicate, Kant also says that it provides the *ground* of the act of judging, of which the logical predicate is, in some sense, a *consequence* (Logik Jäsche, *Akademie Ausgabe IX*, p. 104). Categorical judgments thus have a structure that is to some extent analogous to that of hypothetical judgments. That is, just as the hypothetical judgment “Because this is a T, it is P” may be split up into the two judgments “This is a T” and “This is P,” the singular categorical judgment “This T is P” may be split up into the two “protojudgments”

This T — is P.

Kant says that the first of these parts provides a ground, of which the second is a consequence. Protojudgments are not judgments, but in order to see more clearly what is going on, we might as well expand them to actual judgments:

This is a T — It is P.

The first of these judgments will now be easily recognized as an instance of *casting*, the second as a case of *stating*. By casting an object, we lay the ground on the basis of which we may state something of this object. When Kant says that this is what generally happens in categorical judgments, he seems to assume that what I have called a Sellarsian sentence represents the general form of a (singular) categorical judgment. To make such a judgment is to state something of an item that is cast as an instance of a type.

Let me now fill in some epistemological background. Kant distinguishes two capacities involved in cognition: *sensibility* and *understanding* (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 74). Actualizations of our sensibility are passive affections. By means of affection, an object is given to us. Acts of the understanding, which

Kant calls functions, are active: They *determine* the form of their object (B 93).

Affections relate to intuitions, and functions relate to concepts. I will simplify Kant's terminology a bit, and use "sensibility" and "understanding" for the respective capacities, "affection" and "function" for the actualizations of these capacities, and "concept" and "intuition" for the results of these actualizations.

Since sensibility is a passive capacity and understanding an active one, it seems appropriate to distinguish their respective actualizations, affection and function, in terms of their direction of fit. Functions are analogues of castings, which determine their objects, and affections are analogous to statings, which register features of their objects. (They are only *analogous* to statings because statings are acts, but affections are not.) For affections, the direction of fit will then be intuition to object, and for functions, the direction of fit will be object to concept.

Before going on, I should emphasize that any such sharp division of cognition into affection and function is an artificial one. Considered in isolation, neither affections nor functions actually relate to any object. No relation to an object can be established unless concepts and intuitions come *together* (B 74). This means that in the absence of spontaneous synthesis (which is an act of the understanding), there can be no intuition (A 120 n., B 136f.). We must therefore be careful when we match Kant's terminology onto Austin's distinction. It is important to keep in mind that the whole point of Kant's distinction between active and passive elements in cognition is that in order for cognition to be possible, both must come *together*. Mere affections are blind, and mere functions are empty (B 75). This means that there are no cognitive acts that have only one direction of fit. Taken in isolation, functions are not acts of casting, because functions alone do not relate to objects, and to cast an object is a way of relating to it. Likewise, taken in isolation, affections are not acts of stating, since they do not relate to any object, and stating something of an object is a way of relating to it. If functions and affections differ in their direction of fit and both must come together in order to

yield cognition, every cognitive act must have both directions of fit at once.⁶ It is only *parts* of such acts that may be said to differ in their direction of fit.

Still, applying Austin's terminology to Kant leads to an answer to the question raised in the beginning of this talk: How can our cognition determine its object without in any sense creating or manipulating it? When Austin speaks of an item to type direction of fit, he has in mind the following case: A type description is given, and the task is to find (not to make) an object that fits this description. I submit that when Kant says that objects must "conform to our cognition" (B XVI), he basically means the same. He does not claim that objects must conform to our cognition because they are *made to conform* to it. He means that they must conform to our cognition because they are *cast as conforming* to it. When an item is cast as a T, it conforms to T not because it is created or shaped according to T, but because it is chosen under the condition that it would conform to T.⁷

6. A Priori Knowledge

My account of functions as castings may also be used to explain Kant's notion of *synthetic a priori knowledge*. I show this in two steps. First, I introduce a notion of relative a priori knowledge that is admittedly not Kant's. Then I ask how to modify this conception so that it turns into the Kantian one. As we have seen, Kant describes the substance predicate in a categorical judgment as a condition under which the statement is made. It provides the

⁶ As Stephen Engstrom puts it, our cognition does not stand in a "single unidirectional direction of fit with its object" ("Kant's Distinction between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge," *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 10, 2002, 49-63, p. 53).

⁷ This might seem to suggest a filter model: The object conforms to our cognition because it results from a process of filtering out everything that does not conform to it. However, a filter only works by blocking certain input, and it may be replaced by a different filter. Both is not true here. Casting is not just selecting among input (for what is not cast is not input), and Kant is interested in the most fundamental conditions under which objects of experience may be cast; these cannot be changed.

ground for attributing a property because in a Sellarsian sentence, casting is prior to stating: Before we can state anything, we need to get hold of something to state it of. The first step towards an account of a priori knowledge is to realize that what is known a priori may simply be that which is known *first*. Consider, for instance, the Sellarsian sentence

This ice cube is pink.

When we divide this judgment into its protojudgmental parts and transform these parts into judgments, we get the two judgments

This is an ice cube — It is pink.

The first is not asserted in the original judgment but presupposed; before predicating pinkness, we cast something as an ice cube. The direction of fit is object to type: We single out an object in its capacity of being an ice cube. Now it is important to note that in most cases in which we successfully pick out an object by virtue of its falling under a type, we can know in advance that it will indeed fall under this type. If it did not fall under it, we would probably not have been able to pick it out by virtue of its doing so. That is, whenever we successfully cast something as an ice cube, and do not miscast it as something else, we know a priori that it is an ice cube.

Also, note in passing that nothing I have said so far implies that all a priori knowledge is analytic. One might think that in the case under consideration we know the features of the object a priori because we know the meaning of the term “ice cube.” But casting an object as an ice cube may involve either more or less than understanding the meaning of this term. For instance, it may involve locating a solid object, by sight or touch, in space and time. We may therefore a priori know certain features of an item by considering what is generally involved in acts of casting it, rather than only considering the

meaning of the words that are employed in such acts. If the meaning of the casting term does not fully determine its referent, but only the entire act of casting it does, synthetic (i.e. non-analytic) a priori knowledge is possible.

Still, this is certainly not the way in which Kant wishes to use the expression “a priori.” When we successfully cast something as an ice cube, we know a priori only in a *relative sense* of “a priori” that it is an ice cube. Kant mentions this relative sense only to contrast it to the notion of absolute a priori knowledge he is interested in (B 2). However, if the distinction between a priori knowledge as I have just introduced it and a priori knowledge in Kant’s sense is the distinction between *relative* and *absolute* a priori knowledge, then there might be a way that leads from one to the other. *Relative* a priori knowledge is a priori knowledge that we have relative to a specific context, as when we cast an item as an ice cube. *Absolute* a priori knowledge is knowledge that we can have, for the same reasons, in *any* context where we cast an object.

We may extract the difference between relative and absolute a priori knowledge from section 14 of Kant’s *Metaphysical Deduction*. In this section, Kant draws the by now familiar contrast between representations that are caused by their object and representations that determine their object. He claims that in the first case no a priori knowledge is possible. Then he continues:

In the latter case, representation in itself does not produce its object insofar as existence is concerned, for we are not here speaking of its causality by means of the will. None the less the representation is a priori determinant of its object, if it be the case that only through the representation is it possible to know anything as an object. (B 125, tr. Kemp Smith)

Kant says here that we can have absolute a priori knowledge of an object if there are representations that must be involved whenever we represent an

object. Therefore, in order to see how there can be a priori knowledge in an absolute sense, we need to ask whether there are specific concepts, acts, or capacities that are necessarily involved whenever we cast an object. I cannot do this here, but only note that *if* there are such concepts, acts, or capacities, *then* we can have a priori knowledge of objects by reflecting on these concepts, acts, or capacities.

In general, objects can be cast by mistake. I may cast a potato as an apple and then discover that the concept by which I cast the object does not apply to it after all. As far as Kant is concerned, it is important to note that this kind of mistake is not possible in the case of concepts that are necessarily involved in all acts of casting objects. According to Kant, all acts of casting objects of experience must involve what he calls pure forms of intuition, categories, schemata, and principles. If a proof can be given that such resources are necessarily involved in casting any object whatsoever, the only surprise that can happen when using these resources is that after all, there was no object whatsoever. This may of course still happen (although strictly speaking, it would not be a *mistake*). In casting, we depend on there being something to be cast. If there is nothing to be cast, our act of casting is unsuccessful and does not provide us with any knowledge of any object. However, if there were nothing that we might cast by carrying out our most fundamental casting procedures, cognition would be altogether impossible. Conversely, if cognition is at all possible, a reflection on the way in which we cast the objects of cognition may tell us something about what they are.

7. Further Directions

I believe that my account of a priori knowledge, rudimentary as it is, opens up at least two ways that may lead beyond Kant.

First, if a priori knowledge is knowledge derived from a reflection on what is necessarily involved in casting items, it is possible for it to change. After all, Kant tells us only what is necessarily involved in casting items as *objects of experience*. I do not know whether any sense can be made of the idea of

casting an item other than as an object of experience, but if this could be done, we might learn to cast objects by using concepts other than those that necessarily apply to empirical objects.

Second, there may be such a thing as a *regional* a priori. It might well be that in casting specific kinds of objects (physical objects, living beings, processes, persons, mathematical entities, etc.), different sets of specific but in the respective area still fundamental concepts need to be applied. These concepts might be the subject matter of a special, rather than general, transcendental logic (cf. B 76). Kant's categories may be the concepts by which we cast objects in general, if indeed he is right; but there might also be more specific sets of casting terms by means of which we cast living beings as opposed to mere physical objects, or persons as opposed to mere living beings.