

THE COGNITIVE SUBJECT IN I. KANT'S PHILOSOPHY: CHARACTERISTICS, LIMITS, AND LEGACY

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ABSTRACT:

The cognitive subject in I. Kant's philosophy occupies a central position in the development of modern epistemology, marking a decisive shift from object-centered to subject-centered theories of knowledge. This article investigates the key characteristics of Kant's cognitive subject through a critical analysis of his major works, particularly Critique of Pure Reason, and situates it within the broader context of Enlightenment thought. The study applies dialectical and historical materialist methodology to reveal six defining features: (1) the cognitive subject is formed through Kant's critical method, emphasizing self-reflection and the limits of reason; (2) it is proactive, dynamic, and creative, not a passive recipient of external stimuli; (3) it raises foundational questions about dialectical logic and the conditions of knowledge; (4) it is speculative and ahistorical, reflecting Enlightenment individualism; (5) it is characterized by epistemological limits, as Kant asserts the unknowability of the "thing-in-itself"; and (6) it unifies the cognitive, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of the human subject. The article also critically examines the legacy of Kant's conception, highlighting both its enduring influence on epistemology and its limitations, particularly the abstraction from social and historical context.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive Subject; Kantian Philosophy; Rational Cognition; Phenomena and Noumena; A Priori and Empirical.

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Introduction

For over a thousand years, scholastic philosophy dominated medieval Western Europe, where the role of the human as a cognitive subject was very faintly addressed. Transitioning into the early modern period, Descartes' declaration, "I think, therefore I am," became a groundbreaking proposition in Western Europe. The "I" is the subject of the cognitive process and affirms its own existence through its cognitive process. Following his predecessor, I. Kant clarified the role of humans as cognitive subjects. Kant was not the first to do this; before him, both empiricism and rationalism had also explored ways to liberate human cognition. Empiricism regarded cognition as a process where humans passively receive the influences of objects, while rationalism overly diminished these influences, emphasizing the innate knowledge within humans. Both schools did not adequately represent the role of humans as cognitive subjects. Kant disagreed with both, firmly asserting that only humans, and humans themselves, are the subjects of the cognitive process, which requires both sensibility and rationality. These two cognitive processes are unified in the single subject of the human, who can actively apply principles, tools, and systems available in their cognition to explore the world. He placed humans in their rightful position within the existence and motion of the objective world. From this approach, the cognitive subject in Kant's philosophy has distinctive, novel characteristics compared to earlier philosophers, also earning him the reputation of a great Enlightenment figure, as he helped humans reclaim their rightful place in the world. This positioning and addressing of the issue have made Kant's ideas on a new philosophy and his revolutionary discoveries about the cognitive subject increasingly clear.

Kant's redefinition of the cognitive subject must be situated within the broader evolution of Western epistemology—from scholastic passivity to Cartesian dualism, and ultimately to Kant's critical philosophy. His project does not merely resolve past contradictions between empiricism and rationalism; it inaugurates a new mode of philosophical inquiry that re-centers the subject. However, by privileging the individual and ahistorical subject, Kant's approach also reflects the Enlightenment's limitations, particularly in its abstraction from social praxis and collective cognition.

Literature review

I. Kant is a major philosopher of the world, with extensive research on Kantian philosophy. His philosophy has had a profound influence on global philosophical discourse. Howard Caygill, the author, has observed: "The influence of Kantian philosophy has been and continues to be so pervasive that it is not easily recognized." The study of philosophy in both the analytic tradition of the Anglo-American and the continental traditions of Europe is unimaginable without inheriting the terminology and concepts left by I. Kant. Even outside philosophy, in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, the concepts and argumentative structures of Kantian philosophy are ubiquitous. Kantian philosophical terms and concepts have been further developed by renowned philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and even Derrida, Foucault... This is a testament to Kant's vast influence. In his works, Kant emphasized a discursive approach (akroamatisch/diskursiv), not just fixed concepts, but always seeking new cognitive connections between concepts. Today, Kantian philosophy still asserts itself as an indispensable foundation in guiding the spirit. Alongside its profound influence, no one can doubt Kant's historical contribution to proposing and modernizing philosophical terminology. According to Howard Caygill, the terminological concepts in Kantian philosophy have critically assimilated and developed the classical lexicon from the medieval representatives, defining the flow of meaning, especially rejuvenating them through his own enduring and creative philosophical reflection, rather than repeating what had become rigid and barren. Not only simple concepts like the Beautiful, the Sublime, the Good... but also challenging yet compelling Kantian concepts such as a priori, a posteriori, transcendental, antinomy... have been elaborately explained by author Howard Caygill and placed in the history of their development. This makes it easier for researchers of Kantian philosophy to approach his ideas (Caygill, 2013).

Scientists from the Soviet Academy of Sciences regard I. Kant as the founder of classical German philosophy. Kant's philosophy succinctly presents the most basic issues of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. This work explains the elements that contributed to the progressive leap of classical German philosophy, including Kant's philosophy. Despite the economically and politically backward conditions in

Germany, their thinkers relied on the vast historical experience of capitalist development in Europe, drew on the philosophical achievements of the previous era, and "to a certain extent addressed the new inventions of scientific development" (Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1998).

In Vietnam, research has focused on elucidating the extensive philosophical system of Immanuel Kant, including epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. The work "Kant's Philosophy" by Dr. Trần Thái Đĩnh, first published in 1969, provides a comprehensive overview of Immanuel Kant's philosophy. The work covers three major topics corresponding to the three important fields in Kant's philosophy: knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics (Trần, T. D., 2014).

Researcher Lê Tử Thành regards I. Kant as one of the four important philosophers of modern Western philosophy: René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx. Among them, I. Kant performed a Copernican revolution and truly brought humanity into the Age of Enlightenment. From this point on, humans became masters not only in controlling nature but also in understanding the essence of things. Humans became aware of their own limits (Lê, T.T., 2014).

Researcher Lê Tôn Nghiêm focuses on the continuation of Heidegger's philosophy in relation to I. Kant: starting from Kant's "Copernican revolution," through Nietzsche's call to "reverse all values," to Husserl's repositioning of philosophy as "self-foundational," and finally Heidegger's "destruction of the history of ontology." Through in-depth analysis of these theories, Lê Tôn Nghiêm clarifies the development and transformation of philosophical thought, while exploring the deep-seated origins that have shaped philosophical systems from Kant to Heidegger (Lê, T.N., 2007).

The works mentioned above have comprehensively addressed the philosophy of I. Kant across three dimensions: epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, and the inheritance of modern authors from Kant. However, there has not yet been a detailed study that investigates and analyzes the characteristics of the cognitive subject in Kant's philosophy. This will be the issue I intend to address in this research.

Methodology

The article applies the methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to study the characteristics of the cognitive subject in I. Kant's philosophy. Based on fundamental principles such as comprehensiveness, objectivity, developmental nature, and the principle of specific historical conditions, the study analyzes each feature of the subject in Kant's epistemology, while clarifying the historical position of Kant's philosophy in the movement of Western philosophical thought. The content of the article is developed through a dialectical approach: not only clarifying the characteristics of the cognitive subject in Kant's philosophy but also analyzing the process of its formation and movement within the specific historical-social context of the 18th century. The cognitive subject is positioned in the reciprocal relationship between humans and the world, between rational thinking and practical existential conditions—thereby highlighting the values as well as the limits of Kant's thought concerning modern epistemology and Western philosophy in general. The analysis uses data selected from Kant's seminal works such as the Critique of Pure Reason, the Critique of Practical Reason, the Critique of the Power of Judgment, and reputable secondary research studies. The analytical process is based on a critical reading and comparison of arguments, ensuring a systematic and objective approach to highlight the features of the cognitive subject in Kant's philosophical system.

Results and discussions

1. The cognitive subject in I. Kant's philosophy is constructed through the critical method

I. Kant advocates the construction of a new philosophy through a critical approach, and the term "critical" is used to characterize the nature of Kant's philosophical system (Hữu Ngọc et al., 1987). Critique means to evaluate the general rational capacity for all knowledge that it can achieve independently of experience. Here, reason is understood in a broad sense to include all human cognitive faculties: sensibility, intuition, reason, and the power of judgment. In this broad sense, reason encompasses two domains: theoretical reason and practical reason (ethical life). Pure reason is a type of knowledge that is completely independent of experience. Reason, relying solely on itself in a pure form without any experiential

influence, seems to be able to attain substantial knowledge about objects beyond experience (such as the universe as a whole, God, the immortal soul, and freedom). Knowledge based on experience is easily verifiable because it limits knowledge within the realm of experience. In contrast, pure knowledge (independent of experience) has no way to be verified except by the general laws of logic. However, the general laws of logic only ensure non-contradiction in form, not in content, thus significant errors can occur when reason operates independently.

By the seemingly robust self-operation of reason, people come to metaphysical arguments that lack a foundation. According to I. Kant, this risk must be prevented and remedied by critiquing pure reason: examining the entire cognitive faculties of humans in general, and especially defining the limits of the type of thinking that is independent of experience. He regards reason as a tribunal that assesses all knowledge that humans have acquired to date, which is essentially the process of self-awareness. This tribunal is none other than the critique of pure reason itself. The critique here should be understood as an evaluation of the rational faculty in general regarding all knowledge that reason seeks to attain independently of any experience. I. Kant wrote:

Only through this critique can we completely eradicate the doctrines of materialism, determinism, atheism, irresponsible disbelief, fanatical and superstitious thinking that can be widely harmful, as well as the very dangerous doctrines of idealism and skepticism to academia (Kant, I., 2004, p. 59).

With this approach, I. Kant expresses his desire to awaken humanity through reason. Awakening, for Kant, originates from the source of freedom and autonomy of independent reason, where all dogmas, fanatical theorizing, and paradoxes need to be debated and argued by humans themselves. I. Kant wrote at the conclusion of his work:

Critique must precede the reckless soaring of reason on its own wings, serving as a prerequisite for all rational activity, and together they form philosophy in the truest and most genuine sense of the word. The path of philosophy must be the path of enlightenment, and also the path of science, which once uncovered, will never allow itself to be buried again and lead us astray (Kant, I., 2004, p. 1185).

Human reason, considered the source of all doctrines and ideologies, necessitates clarity about what pure reason can and cannot do, its foundations, and how its principles emerge. Concerning human cognitive capabilities, the question arises: Is metaphysics possible? That is, can humans have knowledge of metaphysical realities such as the universe, the soul, and God?

Throughout his work, I. Kant sought a path of knowledge for humanity. According to him, humans should not rigidly adhere to the old method of thinking (relying solely on experience) but should use their own reason to reevaluate all the knowledge humanity has acquired while uncovering truths that have remained unseen until now. He calls this awakening, asserting that it is human reason, not any supreme deity, that must embark on the quest for truth. Kant also did not hide his ambition to lead human understanding to complete satisfaction:

Thus, only the critical path remains open. If you, the reader, have been kind enough to care and patient enough to accompany me throughout this journey, I ask you to consider whether you are eager to contribute your part in transforming this narrow trail into a highway of thought—a road that for centuries has remained unexplored and is hoped to be completed by the end of this century, with the aim of bringing human reason—from its long-standing desire for understanding and efforts that have yet to succeed—to complete satisfaction (Kant, I., 2004, p. 1191).

To realize his ambition, I. Kant sought to integrate both empiricism and rationalism into his doctrine. Thus, the classical German philosopher posited that there are two branches of human cognition that develop simultaneously, sharing a common root that we do not know, namely sensibility and understanding. Sensibility allows objects to be presented to us, while understanding enables us to think

about these objects. Kant believed that human cognition requires both elements: sensibility (experience) and understanding (concepts, categories).

Through the critical method, I. Kant's goal was not to study the object of cognition but rather to first clarify the cognitive subject, that is, to examine the laws governing human cognition, to answer the question: What can I know? According to him, the human cognitive process consists of three stages: sensibility (sensory perception), understanding (intellectual power), and reason (rational power).

Humans are free and know they are free, hence they cannot act deterministically like physical objects and other animal species. Therefore, humans do not find satisfaction in the world of sensations. Human reason does not accept this; it seeks answers to the existence of all things. That is, human reason is not content with a visible world comprised only of phenomena; it strives to illuminate what connects the entire universe internally. With such an approach, I. Kant used the critical method to develop his concept of the cognitive subject. Before him, several philosophers had used this method, but Kant elevated critique to a new form—critical philosophy. Through this, he changed previous absolute notions about reason.

2. The cognitive subject in I. Kant's philosophy is characterized by its proactive, dynamic, and creative nature

I. Kant believed that before beginning to understand anything, one must first study the cognitive tools and the capabilities of the subject's cognition. He wrote: "Let us experiment to see if we can make better progress in solving the problems of metaphysics by assuming that objects must conform to our cognition" (Kant, I., 2004, p. 44). He called this the "Copernican revolution" in philosophy. That is, he reversed the conventional logic in philosophy, especially in epistemology, just as Copernicus had done in astronomy. Pre-Kantian philosophy assumed that knowledge must conform to objects; Kant reversed this to assert that objects must conform to knowledge. He shifted the focus of study from the object of cognition to the subject of cognition. Thus, instead of passively receiving impacts from the objective real world, Kant believed that humans should actively use cognitive tools to explore and construct that world, thereby requiring that the objects of cognition conform to human knowledge. From the beginning, Kant viewed the essence of human consciousness not as a passive reflection of the object but highlighted the active, proactive nature of human consciousness.

To perceive something, first, we need the five senses, which I. Kant refers to as "sensibility." Sensibility can be affected by objects, which Kant calls "receptivity." Objects impact human senses, and humans perceive them through intuition. Without intuition, there would be no knowledge of objects. The nature of intuition is sensibility, but it is not identical to it. If intuition is formed from experience, then sensibility is formed from empirical sensations and a priori intuitions. Sensibility is the capacity to receive representations and the means by which objects are presented to us, and it is from this that intuition arises

According to I. Kant, there are two forms of intuition: empirical intuition and pure intuition. Empirical intuition is the form of intuition that relates to objects through sensation; it provides us with knowledge concerning the material properties of phenomena. Pure intuition, by contrast, is intuition in which there is no object of sensation. The form of this type of intuition already exists in human consciousness a priori—that is, as space and time.

For I. Kant, space and time are the subjective forms of human consciousness and possess an a priori character—that is, they precede experience. All objects of sensible intuition are situated within space and time. This means that the perception of objects and phenomena within space and time is the result of the activity of human consciousness. As Lê C.S. comment, "Space and time function like empty molds into which forms, impressions, and chaotic, heterogeneous states are cast, and from which they are shaped into sensations, images, or representations with determinate character, thus constituting the objects and phenomena of the world" (Lê, C.S., 2012, p. 39).

In summary, I. Kant maintains that there are objectively existing things outside of us. These objects affect our sensible faculties through impressions—diverse and chaotic states. Such impressions and states constitute the starting point for all human knowledge. However, if cognition relied solely on these impressions, human experience would merely register the existence of external objects, without any determination of their form (space) or their process of occurrence (time). In order to make such

determinations, an a priori faculty—already present within human consciousness—is required; this faculty manifests itself through space and time. It is by virtue of this a priori faculty that humans are able to perceive and apprehend objects, phenomena, and events of the world encountered in ordinary sensible experience. Space and time, in Kant’s view, are detached from matter and transformed into subjective forms of human sensibility, innately given. Accordingly, he denies the objective existence of space and time, asserting instead that they are subjective and a priori forms of sensible intuition. I. Kant thus closely links space and time with the activity of the subject, whereby the cognitive subject actively engages in the cognition of objects within the phenomenal world.

Human cognition does not stop at the level of sensibility but must proceed to the stage of understanding (*Verstand*). The perceptions and representations that the subject attains through sensible cognition can only provide particular, contingent knowledge—fragmented, limited, and confined to individual events apprehended through sensible intuition. That which transcends these isolated events and comprehends a series of phenomena as a whole must derive from another source—namely, the human intellect (*Verstand*), whose instrument consists in the pure categories of the understanding. I. Kant defines this faculty as follows: “Understanding is not a faculty of intuition. However, apart from intuition, there is no other mode of cognition than by means of concepts. Therefore, all cognition of the understanding—at least of human understanding—is cognition by means of concepts; it is not intuitive, but discursive” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 229). At this level, the understanding (*Verstand*)—that is, thinking through its system of concepts and categories—engages in judgments in order to construct the object of cognition. The object is not the origin of knowledge about itself in the form of concepts and categories. On the contrary, it is the very forms of the understanding—namely, concepts and categories—that constitute the object of cognition. This is the very foundation of scientific knowledge, which is universal and necessary. Ordinary experience at the level of sensible intuition cannot provide a theory, nor can it offer universal and necessary knowledge. Hence, scientific knowledge, together with its two essential characteristics—universality and necessity—belongs to the domain of a priori knowledge (that is, knowledge that is given independently of experience).

According to I. Kant, the categories of thought are not generalizations derived from experience but rather pure, subjective forms of thinking. This conception forms the foundation of his doctrine of a priori knowledge. He poses the question: “Is there truly a kind of knowledge independent of experience and of all impressions of the senses? We call such knowledge a priori” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 78). For I. Kant, the understanding (*Verstand*) is the source of a priori knowledge, which exists innately in the human mind and is independent of experience. He writes:

It is necessary that the understanding be presupposed; hence, I must regard the law of the understanding as something already present in me a priori, before objects are given to me. That law is expressed through a priori concepts, and thus all objects of experience must necessarily conform to and be in accordance with them (Kant, I., 2004, p. 45).

For I. Kant, sensibility is merely the source of knowledge of particulars, whereas the understanding is the source of knowledge of universals—that is, of what is universal and necessary. Sensible intuition relates to objects and transforms them into sensory experience; the stage of understanding, by contrast, directly engages with sensory experience by applying categories to refine and organize the material of sense perception, thereby generating knowledge that is both universal and necessary—that is, valid and objective scientific knowledge. I. Kant holds that these categories of thought are not derived from experience; rather, it is through these categories that experience itself becomes possible. Here, the category is not a reflection of objective reality but an a priori condition for the very possibility of experience, and simultaneously a condition for the constitution of the natural world itself. As the scholar Trần Thái Đĩnh observes:

A category is the mold that shapes judgments; it is an empty (pure) form bestowed upon all human beings by nature. With these predetermined molds, humans receive the raw materials from nature and thereby construct knowledge for themselves... Accordingly, one might compare Kant’s categories to a baker’s molds: with a dragon-shaped mold, for

instance, the amorphous mass of dough is shaped into a single, clearly defined cake. (Trần, T.Đ., 2014, pp. 97–98).

Categories are the gold standard and guiding measure of human knowledge—they are the origin of knowledge and the laws that human beings must follow in every cognitive act. The natural world, in essence, is a world of phenomena created by human consciousness and rendered intelligible—namely, comprehensible within the framework of the system of a priori categories inherent in the human mind. As Kant states: “A priori cognition relates only to phenomena—that is, to what appears to us—and we may require that these conform to the concepts we impose upon them” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 47). Cognition is not a static, one-directional process in which the object is the cause and consciousness is the effect; rather, it is a dialectical, two-way process in which cause and effect continuously alternate and transform into one another.

Kant’s discovery holds fundamental significance for the subsequent development of epistemological theory. He identified space, time, and the categories as forms of human cognition. Without these forms and their associated instruments, proper cognition would be impossible. From this perspective, the cognitive subject does not approach the world equipped with pre-existing or innate knowledge, nor is knowledge the gradual unfolding of inherent seeds. Rather, cognition is made possible by the cognitive tools available to the subject. One may say that, while continuing the spirit of empiricism by acknowledging that the material content of knowledge originates from sensation, I. Kant simultaneously links the form of cognition to the activity of the subject. He vacillates between idealism and materialism—in more precise terms, he occupies a dualist position in epistemological theory. Despite these limitations, Kant’s conception of the categorial nature of thought already contains the germ of a future materialist theory of the concreteness of thought—according to which, the concrete can only be fully disclosed through scientific abstractions.

While the idealist character of I. Kant’s conception of the understanding (*Verstand*) cannot be denied, it was nevertheless Kant who, for the first time, introduced into epistemological theory a profoundly important principle—the principle of the active and autonomous role of the cognitive subject. As is well known, all materialist philosophers prior to Kant were largely metaphysical in orientation, and thus regarded the cognitive process as a passive act of human intuition in the face of the surrounding material world—as a direct, mechanical reflection of the laws of the material world into human consciousness, much like an optical projection. Kant decisively rejected this view of cognition as passive activity, and instead proposed the idea of cognition as an intentional and active process. This active role of the subject in cognition is manifested in its operations of selecting, synthesizing, and processing data according to the specific laws of the understanding.

The categories of the understanding (*Verstand*) possess authority only within the bounds of the phenomenal world; they are incapable of penetrating into the realm of the “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*). Yet, it lies in the very nature of human thought to strive toward the knowledge of the supreme and the absolute. To achieve this, human cognition must go beyond the understanding and ascend to the stage of reason (*Vernunft*), which employs more abstract and generalized instruments of cognition—namely, ideas (*Ideen*). Reason, in its broad sense, refers to human intelligence; in its narrower sense, it is the highest stage in the process of cognition.

All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher in the human mind than reason to process the material of intuition and bring it into the highest unity of thought (Kant, I., 2004, p. 593).

In Kant’s conception, reason regulates human cognition throughout the entire process, guiding it within the framework of the necessary and universal forms of knowledge. The object of reason is the understanding itself. As Kant writes: “If the understanding is the faculty that brings unity to phenomena according to rules, then reason is the faculty that brings unity to the rules of the understanding under principles” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 597). In this way, reason determines the objectivity of knowledge.

However, this raises a crucial question: What makes such a function of reason possible? Why is reason capable of organizing cognition into these a priori forms? And what binds the categories and

concepts into a coherent unity within reality? Kant answers these questions with his own consistent epistemological standpoint: all such operations are conditioned by the nature of the subject. He asserts that the deep foundation for the unity of cognition—without which reason could not fulfill its function—is the act of self-consciousness on the part of the subject. Kant calls this the transcendental unity of apperception—that is, the synthesis of representations that lies beyond the limits of experience. The essential point, for Kant, is to overcome the narrow and naïve illusion of natural consciousness, which mistakenly assumes that things can be known as they are in themselves.

Reason (*Vernunft*) is the highest faculty of human intellect. It cannot be directly applied to concrete objects or sensory experience but operates only upon concepts, judgments, and the laws of the understanding (*Verstand*). The synthesizing power of reason, through indirect methods of inference, serves to generalize the abundant content of sensible cognition into fundamental principles, thereby attaining objective knowledge. At this level, I. Kant introduces the principal ideas (*Ideen*) of reason: the idea of psychology, cosmology, and theology—corresponding to the soul, the universe, and God. Among these, Kant places particular emphasis on cosmological ideas. At this point, reason has transcended the world of phenomena and entered the realm of the “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*). Inevitably, it encounters disappointment in its pursuit of truth, yet reason continues this endeavor, for it inherently seeks to understand what internally unites the entire universe.

Kant ultimately concludes that human rational cognition cannot attain knowledge of the “thing-in-itself.” However, he also affirms that although we cannot know the “thing-in-itself,” we may still think or conceive it. The cognitive subject does not need to rely on any external force—such as a deity or divine being—to understand the world; rather, it independently undertakes the pursuit of knowledge using its own cognitive faculties.

3. The cognitive subject in I. Kant’s philosophy raises the issue of dialectical logic

I. Kant regarded the principles of logical thinking as the object of transcendental logic and made significant contributions to the development of logic. Formal logic, in his view, could no longer meet the demands of scientific and philosophical development in his time. Kant believed that transcendental consciousness could not rely on formal logic, even though formal logic still held a certain epistemological value. According to him, formal logic is overly formal—it “abstracts from all content of the understanding and from all differences of its objects and deals with nothing but the mere form of thought” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 202). The forms of thought studied by formal logic are thus empty and contentless, and therefore incapable of establishing truth. While he did not deny the role of formal logic, Kant emphasized the necessity of constructing a new logic—transcendental logic—whose object must be a special kind of judgment: judgments that possess strict universality and necessity. Without such judgments, mathematics and theoretical natural science would be impossible. Only the new logic—transcendental logic—“in which one does not abstract from all content of cognition” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 204), can provide genuine truth. In contrast to formal logic, which merely works with pre-given knowledge, transcendental logic must provide the criteria for acquiring new knowledge and thus can properly fulfill the role of epistemological theory and methodology. According to Kant, transcendental logic possesses universality and necessity. These qualities, he argued, are attributable to the forms of the understanding and reason, which are a priori and not organically connected with empirical reality.

With this approach to the problem, E.V. Ilyenkov pointed out:

I. Kant was the first to consciously pose and address the problem of logic through a critical analysis of its content and historical fate. The traditional framework of logic was, for the first time, subjected to scrutiny in comparison with the actual processes of thought occurring in the natural and social sciences (Ilyenkov, E.V., 2003, p. 112).

Kant considered such judgments to be a priori—existing prior to and independent of experience, yet at the same time necessary for experience, insofar as they serve as conditions for its proper operation. These types of judgments presuppose the existence of categories—that is, universal logical forms. Therefore, Kant’s theory of a priori knowledge characterizes theoretical knowledge and the logical forms

of thought in general. Kant affirmed that the law of contradiction in formal logic is purely formal and lacks content; for synthetic judgments, only the laws of transcendental logic can have real efficacy. The task of the transcendental logic constructed by Kant is to determine the origin, scope, and objectivity of a priori knowledge. According to Kant, transcendental logic possesses both universality and necessity; it includes the method of transcendental analysis in the domain of the understanding, and transcendental dialectic as the doctrine of reason. Moreover, Kant regarded transcendental logic as a theory of the categories—that is, as a system of interconnected concepts that are both universal and necessary—while also clarifying its distinction from formal logic. Kant’s transcendental logic embodies profoundly dialectical elements, which were later inherited and developed by both Fichte and Hegel.

The starting point for I. Kant in constructing transcendental logic lies in his view that sensible and intuitive data cannot provide true knowledge of things, since such data are inherently subjective. Only when the cognitive subject possesses transcendental consciousness (i.e., consciousness beyond experience) can genuine scientific knowledge become possible. This form of consciousness differs from individual consciousness, which always bears particular characteristics; yet within each individual consciousness, there exists a set of general regularities in the form of a unity of a priori laws and forms. It is precisely such transcendental consciousness that can yield a scientific representation of the world. However, this implies that the objectivity of knowledge does not reside in its accurate reflection of material objects in the external world, but rather in its being a product of transcendental consciousness—entirely independent of objective reality. Accordingly, the stage of sensible intuition involves the use of space and time to process the material of sense perception, while the understanding (*Verstand*) uses categories to arrange and systematize that material, thereby producing causality, necessity, and the laws of things—thus giving rise to knowledge that is universal, necessary, and constituted through synthetic a priori judgments. The stage of the understanding must be combined with that of sensible intuition in order to ensure the objectivity, universality, and necessity of knowledge. As Kant wrote: “There are two stems of human knowledge, perhaps springing from a common root unknown to us, namely sensibility and understanding. Through the former, objects are given to us; through the latter, they are thought” (Kant, I., 2004, p. 109)—and from this process, concepts are born. In this way, Kant simultaneously overcomes the limitations of empiricism and the shortcomings of rationalism, thereby establishing knowledge that is both universal and necessary.

At the stage of the understanding (*Verstand*), the “Transcendental Analytic”—as a constitutive part of transcendental logic (concerned with the pure concepts of the understanding)—begins to take effect. However, the process of cognition does not end there. At this point, cognition merely involves the systematization, classification, and ordering of the received material. The cognitive subject must advance to a third stage—that of pure reason (*Vernunft*). It is at this stage that the “Transcendental Dialectic” begins to operate—the second and most fundamental component of transcendental logic, which has the task of:

Critiquing dialectical illusion... critiquing the understanding and reason... with the aim of exposing the erroneous illusions inherent in their unfounded claims, and of reducing the exaggerated ambitions for discovery and expansion of cognition—ambitions mistakenly believed by these faculties to be achievable solely through transcendental principles—to the more appropriate task of evaluating the judgments of pure understanding and defending it against sophistical illusion (Kant, I., 2004, p. 113).

The process of cognition culminates at this stage. According to I. Kant, the essence of reason (*Vernunft*) is dialectical in nature, and the doctrine of reason constitutes transcendental dialectic. Reason is the highest faculty of the cognitive subject. It cannot be directly applied to concrete objects or sensory experience, but operates instead upon concepts, judgments, and the laws of the understanding. The synthesizing power of reason works through indirect methods of inference, enabling the generalization of the rich and diverse content of sensible cognition into the most fundamental principles. It is this capacity that allows reason to attain knowledge at the highest level of unity. While the understanding limits the cognitive capacity of the subject to the phenomenal world—finite and conditional—at the level of reason, the subject’s cognitive aspiration reaches toward absolute, unconditional, and free knowledge. Kant

expresses this in the form of the principal ideas of reason: the idea of psychology, the idea of cosmology, and the idea of theology. These correspond to: the soul—as the supreme unity of all mental phenomena; the universe—as the supreme unity of all physical phenomena; and God—as the supreme unity of both physical and mental phenomena. In this way, I. Kant established an approach to traditional metaphysical objects of idealist philosophy such as the soul, the universe, and God.

I. Kant directly developed the dialectical method with respect to the idea of the cosmos. He asserted that human reason possesses an inherent aspiration to comprehend the world as the “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich), aiming to attain absolute knowledge. This pursuit inevitably leads to irresolvable contradictions, which he termed antinomies. According to Kant, these are not ordinary logical contradictions but contradictions rooted in the very nature of human reason itself. He presented four antinomies, each consisting of a pair of opposing propositions—a thesis and an antithesis. These four contradictions correspond to four fundamental questions concerning the cosmological idea, as follows: *Thesis*: The world has a limit in space and time. *Antithesis*: The world is infinite in space and time. *Thesis*: The world as a complex whole is composed of simple parts. *Antithesis*: The world is not composed of simple parts; nothing in the world is simple. *Thesis*: In the natural world, there exists causality, but also freedom. *Antithesis*: There is no freedom; everything proceeds according to the laws of nature. *Thesis*: There exists necessity in the world. *Antithesis*: There is no necessity in the world; everything is contingent.

According to I. Kant, the first two antinomies—concerning finitude and infinitude, simplicity and complexity—belong to the category of mathematical antinomies. The latter two—concerning freedom and necessity, necessity and contingency—belong to the category of dynamical antinomies. Kant regarded these antinomies as dialectical oppositions. His resolution was as follows: both the thesis and the antithesis in the mathematical antinomies are false, because concepts such as limit, infinity, space, and time cannot be applied to the world as the “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich), which lies beyond space and time. As for the phenomenal world, these properties are never fully manifested. In the case of the two dynamical antinomies, if one side of the contradiction holds true for the phenomenal world, it is false for the thing-in-itself, and vice versa. Kant thus concluded that since these contradictions arise from the activity of reason itself, reason cannot attain knowledge of the thing-in-itself and must instead be content with appearances—that is, with phenomena. As he noted, “dialectic itself is nothing but the logic of appearance” (Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1998, p. 81). Through these antinomies, Kant introduced a general conception of contradiction as a consequence inherent in the nature of reason itself. Furthermore, Kant’s dialectic contains the early seeds of a later doctrine of real dialectic.

Although I. Kant did not fully construct a system of dialectical logic, through his transcendental logic he outlined the unity between the a priori and the empirical, elucidating the rational structure of empirical knowledge and the categorical framework of experience. He also revealed the unity and tension between theory and experience, the qualitative distinction between theoretical cognition and empirical knowledge, and the dialectical necessity of a conceptual leap from sensibility to reason. Kant made significant contributions in critiquing epistemological dogmatism, thereby also criticizing the metaphysical mode of thinking. Regrettably, this critique ultimately culminated in idealism and agnosticism. Nevertheless, he remains the progenitor of transcendental idealist dialectics. Owing to his contributions, Hegel was able to develop dialectics into a scientific system, which was later transformed by Karl Marx into dialectical materialism.

4. The cognitive subject in I. Kant’s philosophy is characterized by its unknowability

Unknowability (agnosticism) is the result of Kant’s resolution of the second aspect of the fundamental problem of philosophy. With regard to the question, “Can humans know the world?”, two opposing philosophical schools emerged. The vast majority of philosophers—both materialist and idealist—affirmed that human beings are capable of knowing the world. In contrast, those who denied this possibility are referred to as agnostics. According to agnosticism, humans are unable to comprehend the object of knowledge, or if they can, it is only in terms of superficial appearances, since the accuracy of the representations provided by the senses in the process of cognition cannot be guaranteed as true. The relative nature of knowledge led to the emergence of skepticism, a current that traces back to ancient Greek philosophy. Adherents of this current elevated doubt into a principle for evaluating knowledge,

arguing that humans are incapable of attaining objective truth. Despite its limitations, Renaissance skepticism played an important role in the struggle against the ideology and authority of the medieval Church, as it questioned the veracity of Scripture and religious dogmas. From this tradition of skepticism, some philosophers progressed toward agnosticism, among whom I. Kant stands as a prominent representative.

I. Kant not only demonstrated the capacity of human cognition but also pointed out its inherent limits. Kant's transcendentalism emerged in the course of his explanation of space, time, and the categories. Intuitions and empirical concepts acquire universality and necessity through the cognitive faculties of the subject. He associated this universality and necessity—as characteristics of scientific knowledge—with the a priori forms of cognition. Space, time, and the categories, when applied to the material of sense perception, determine the universality and necessity of empirical experience, thus establishing the foundations of scientific knowledge in general.

Thought, along with its objective significance—that is, its universality and necessity—is confined to the realm of phenomena. Upon crossing into the realm of the “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich), human cognition becomes agnostic. Thus, human beings can only know the world of phenomena, while the “thing-in-itself” remains beyond the reach of human intellect.

The thing-in-itself—although it exists in itself—is not accessible to our cognition. For what compels us to move beyond the boundaries of empirical experience, beyond the realm of all phenomena, is precisely the idea of the unconditioned, which reason necessarily demands and regards as inherent in the things-in-themselves—as something naturally connected to everything that is conditioned, through which the entire chain of conditions can be completed. (The unconditioned is merely a subjective demand of reason, but reason mistakenly regards it as something objectively real in the things-in-themselves) (Kant, I., 2004, p. 47).

This constitutes the limit of human cognitive capacity as set forth by I. Kant. For this reason, throughout his life, he was unable to reach the ultimate end of knowledge as he had aspired to. Kant himself acknowledged that his philosophy was idealist insofar as it affirmed that human beings can only know the determinations of their own faculties, and thus cannot attain the truly objective. He arrived at a paradoxical conclusion:

We have no concepts of the understanding, that is, no elements of cognition, except in so far as corresponding intuitions can be given to these concepts; hence, we cannot have knowledge of objects as things-in-themselves, but only insofar as they are objects of sensible intuition, that is, as appearances. From this it follows that the boundary of all possible speculative cognition of reason is restricted to mere objects of experience... although we cannot know these objects as things-in-themselves, we may at least think of them as things-in-themselves (Kant, I., 2004, p. 52).

He denied the possibility of human cognition reaching the “thing-in-itself,” thereby falling into agnosticism. Yet, in the deeper layers of his thought, I. Kant did not underestimate the cognitive capacity of human beings—even though he maintained that concepts and categories, that is, the forms of thought, do not allow the subject to transcend the boundaries of experience. Superficially, this view seems to diminish the power of human reason, but in essence, it enables a direct confrontation with the profound and intractable problems of cognition, revealing a contradiction inherent in the nature of thought itself: in thought, all processes and movements of the external world are reflected in the form of static, rigid logical structures.

Kant stands as a representative of agnosticism, but his agnosticism lies at the outermost limit of cognition—it is the agnosticism of an unrelenting intellectual ambition to know and transform the world without end or boundary. This, in itself, may be considered a compelling antinomy within Kant's own theory of knowledge. As human reason strives to go beyond the realm of phenomena and penetrate the world of the thing-in-itself, inevitable disappointment awaits it along this path. Nevertheless, reason still ventures forward in this “rebellion.” While human beings cannot know the thing-in-itself, they can

certainly think it, conceptualize it—and perhaps, at some point, the thing-in-itself may transform into the thing-for-us, and thus become knowable to human cognition.

Moreover, Kant's agnosticism, in the social context of his time, bore a positive significance—it can even be paradoxically said that his agnosticism served the cause of enlightenment. For he transferred the ideas of the soul, the universe, and God into the realm of the thing-in-itself. These are entities about which human beings have no empirical experience whatsoever—so how can one affirm their existence? In this way, all previous doctrines concerning the soul, the universe, and God were revealed to be dogmatic and unfounded. This was Kant's unique strategy to challenge the groundless claims of traditional metaphysics. Thus, Kant's agnosticism is not trivial but rather exceptional. His agnosticism, though rooted in the skepticism of David Hume, went far beyond that of his predecessor, offering a distinctive and profound perspective on the limits and possibilities of human cognition.

5. The cognitive subject in I. Kant's philosophy is unified with both the cognitive subject and the aesthetic subject

The unity between the cognitive subject and the moral subject

The revolution that I. Kant carried out in philosophy concerns not only the cognitive subject but also the moral subject. In the conclusion of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant wrote:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not need to seek them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or located at an immeasurable distance beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence (Kant, I., 2007a, p. 278).

“The starry heavens above me” symbolizes the world of theoretical cognition, while “the moral law within me” represents the world of action. The unity between epistemological theory and moral philosophy in Kant's thought is most clearly expressed in the transition from the question posed by theoretical reason—What can I know?—to the question posed by practical reason—What ought I to do? This shift marks a movement from examining the cognitive subject to examining the moral subject. Unlike the cognitive subject, which is considered in relation to an object external to itself (the objective world), the moral subject is examined as something internal to the human being. Here, the subject who governs reason is no longer understood in its theoretical capacity as the active agent of cognition, but rather in its practical capacity as the active agent of morality.

I. Kant regarded the necessary object of pure practical reason as the highest Good (das höchste Gut), in which virtue constitutes the supreme good and serves as the condition for human beings to be worthy of happiness. However, virtue alone does not yet constitute the complete and perfect Good. The question then arises: how can there be a “reconciliation” between nature (the human being as a sensuous being) and morality (the human being as a moral personality)? It is precisely the search for answers to this question that leads pure practical reason into a paradox. This paradox lies in the fact that the highest Good is a necessary object of the faculty of desire (the faculty of willing) because pure reason always demands the idea of an absolute and unconditional end for all that is conditional. Yet, in the sensible world, any necessary connection between virtue and happiness is entirely excluded. In this situation, the moral law, in issuing its imperative to human beings, would seem to direct them toward illusory, imagined ends—and thus, would be self-invalidating.

To resolve this paradox, I. Kant proposed the postulates of practical reason: first, the existence of an immortal soul in the world beyond, which serves as the ultimate judge of human moral actions; second, the existence of absolute freedom in the world beyond, which serves as the foundation for all human activity; and third, the existence of God in the world beyond, who acts as the supreme cause guaranteeing justice in all moral actions of human beings.

These postulates are principles that cannot be proven; they serve as necessary presuppositions—indispensable hypotheses for all moral action as human beings strive toward the highest Good. Through

this, I. Kant sought to affirm that human beings should place their hope solely in the moral law itself. These moral principles both demand and sustain human hope—they are at once imperative and the foundation upon which such hope rests.

I. Kant emphasized the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason. According to him, knowledge has value only insofar as it helps human beings become more fully human and provides a firm moral foundation for realizing the ideal of the highest Good. However, scientific knowledge alone does not make a person moral. Greek philosophy once created the illusion that empirical knowledge could serve as a basis for moral life, yet experience has shown this to be a misconception—scientific knowledge does not cultivate human virtue. As Kant noted, “Science (when pursued critically and methodically) is the narrow gateway to the correct doctrine of practical wisdom” (Kant, I., 2007a, p. 280).

For Kant, moral action must be grounded in the human will as autonomy. The good will, understood as autonomous, is not passive; it constantly requires the moral subject to act. Thus, his moral principles serve as a “compass” to guide human beings through the storms of life’s ocean. Therefore, to distinguish between Good and Evil, one does not need advanced learning—moral intuition alone suffices. According to him, the capacity for moral judgment is innate; it is not derived from knowledge. To become an honest, conscientious, pure-hearted individual with good will, we do not need science or philosophy—we only need reverence for moral law.

Thus, in comparison with the cognitive subject, the moral subject in I. Kant’s philosophy possesses a new faculty. On the one hand, Kant distinguishes between things as appearances and things-in-themselves (*Ding an sich*), and critiques the erroneous use of reason in the domain of theoretical cognition. On the other hand, he asserts that in the moral domain, the use of reason is decisive and unrestricted. The question “What ought I to do?” arises from the moral laws within the self, from the principles or duties of practical reason. However, these principles must also conform to universal morality—they must possess a priori validity for all human beings. Kant called these moral principles categorical imperatives. They are termed imperatives insofar as they govern action, and they are independent of desires or particular inclinations. The categorical imperative contains an inner necessity. A moral action is nothing other than respect for the categorical imperative and the fulfillment of duty, undertaken through a consciousness of necessity that arises within human reason itself. As Kant wrote: “The maxim of self-love (prudence) merely advises us; but the law of morality commands us. In this, we observe a great distinction between what merely advises and what we are bound to do as a duty” (Kant, I., 2007a, p. 65).

The examination of the human being from two perspectives—as cognitive subject and as moral subject—leads to a condition of human “dualism”: on the one hand, the human appears as a phenomenal subject; on the other hand, as a transcendental subject (understood both as a transcendental cognitive subject and as a transcendental moral subject). As a natural being, the human—like all living entities existing in space and time—is subject to the deterministic laws of nature, that is, the human being is dependent upon external forces. Yet, as a rational being, the human is governed by the laws of reason and is therefore free and autonomous. Both the moral human and the cognitive human in I. Kant’s philosophy are unified by a single point: they are both expressions of a speculative doctrine of the subject.

The unity of the cognitive subject and the aesthetic subject

Aesthetics has existed since antiquity. Plato and Aristotle regarded beauty as objective; Beauty was understood as an attribute of the cosmos, independent of human beings. Humans, as aesthetic subjects, merely discovered beauty. In the modern era, however, the sensualist (empiricist) school—represented by thinkers such as G. Locke—provided significant inspiration for I. Kant by arguing that beauty may exist in nature and in art, but without human perception, it becomes meaningless. The inclusion of the human subject in aesthetics—transforming the aesthetic subject into its central point—marked a shift from classical aesthetics to modern aesthetics. Beauty is neither purely objective nor purely subjective; rather, it is the result of a relationship between the subject and the object. Meanwhile, rationalist thinkers considered beauty a matter of emotion or desire, and the aesthetician Baumgarten classified aesthetics as belonging to the lower faculty of cognition.

I. Kant was shaped by this intellectual context—a context marked by the limitations of both sensualist and rationalist schools: the rationalists underestimated the importance of beauty, while the sensualists overly emphasized subjectivity. Kant aligned himself with neither camp but sought to overcome the limitations of both. According to him, the human being possesses three faculties: the faculty

of cognition, the faculty of desire, and the faculty of judgment. The faculty of judgment serves as a bridge between the faculties of cognition and desire.

The faculty of judgment consists of two forms: determining judgment and reflective judgment. Determining judgment subsumes particular phenomena under universal laws in order to produce knowledge. Reflective judgment, by contrast, moves from particular phenomena toward the discovery of universal principles. Reflective judgment is the key to unlocking the realm of aesthetics, for it is through reflective judgment that aesthetic judgment is made possible.

In the Preface to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, I. Kant wrote: “With this work, I have completed the entire critical enterprise” (Kant, I., 2007b, p. 7). This work represents his response to the question, “What may I hope for?” and completes the triadic structure of his great critical philosophy. I. Kant divides his critical philosophy into two principal parts: theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy. While theoretical philosophy investigates the legislation of nature through the pure concepts (categories) of the understanding within the bounds of experience, practical philosophy examines the legislation of freedom through the concepts of pure reason in the domains of morality and right. In other words, the *Critique of Pure Reason* concerns itself with the cosmos and the world of nature, while the *Critique of Practical Reason* addresses the domain of freedom and the moral actions of human beings. At first glance, these seem like two entirely separate realms—“as distant as heaven and earth”: one governed by deterministic natural laws, the other by the autonomy of the moral subject. Human beings, it appears, inhabit two opposing worlds, which Kant famously refers to as an “immense abyss,” stating that “they seem to be altogether different worlds, where the first cannot exert any influence upon the second, but the second must exercise influence upon the first...” (Kant, I., 2007b, p. 17). How, then, can these two worlds be united? Kant admits that there is no a priori answer to the question of such a unification, as the cognitive capacities of the subject are finite. The human individual does not possess the absolute standpoint of God, from which all distinctions might be reconciled and subsumed within a higher unity. It is precisely under these conditions that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* assumes its mediating role—serving as the bridge between the two branches of philosophy, thereby establishing a unified philosophical system. In order to mediate between the realm of practical freedom and the realm of sensible phenomena governed by the categories and rules of the understanding, Kant introduces the faculty of judgment and the capacity for aesthetic evaluation. This faculty constitutes an a priori capacity of the human being, one that indicates how objects should be reflected upon and evaluated—not through objective laws, but through subjective principles that, nevertheless, are universally shared across all individuals.

I. Kant had previously attempted to reconcile rationalism and empiricism in his investigation of the origin, nature, and scope of human cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he affirms both the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment and, at the same time, maintains that aesthetic judgment involves an assessment of objects according to a certain rule—namely, a principle of universality—but not one based on scientific concepts or moral laws. While in theoretical philosophy Kant conceives of nature as a totality of lawful regularity, where all phenomena are subsumed under the conditions of possible experience, such a rational conception of nature plays no determining role in the aesthetic domain. This is because “aesthetics” is not a neatly cultivated garden, arranged in strict order by the understanding; rather, it is an infinitely rich nature, which does not conform to any artificial rule, but instead “provides enduring nourishment for taste” (Kant, I., 2007b, p. 138).

The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* demonstrates that aesthetic satisfaction is a unique form of human pleasure—one that is both profound and noble, both natural and morally elevating. This is precisely why I. Kant describes judgment as a bridge spanning the abyss, connecting the world of sense (the sensible realm) with the world of understanding (the intelligible realm), the empirical world with the moral-spiritual world. As a mediating faculty that unites the two main divisions of philosophy into a coherent whole, Kant defines the power of judgment as follows: “Judgment in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal” (Kant, I., 2007b, p. 23). The faculty of judgment is thus a cognitive power alongside the understanding, but unlike understanding and reason, judgment as the faculty of applying rules is not itself constrained by any fixed rules. Kant remarked: “Judgment is a peculiar talent that can be practiced, but not taught. It is the specific characteristic called ‘mother wit,’

and no schooling can replace it if it is lacking” (Kant, I., 2007b, p. 375). The absence of judgment is often referred to as stupidity, and no remedy can be found for it.

Kant further distinguishes between two forms of judgment: determinative judgment and reflective judgment. Determinative judgment is the application of a given universal (a law or rule of nature or freedom) to a particular, thus yielding scientific or moral knowledge. In addition to understanding and reason, determinative judgment involves another essential cognitive capacity—namely, feeling. This leads to reflective judgment, which turns inward toward subjective feelings. The defining characteristic of reflective judgment is purposiveness, as it is closely bound to the domain of pleasure and displeasure, and serves as the mediating bridge between nature and freedom.

I. Kant affirms that aesthetic judgment does not arise from the understanding as a cognitive faculty, not even in the form of sensory cognition. Nor is aesthetic judgment the result of the object’s inherent properties exerting an effect on the subject’s senses to generate empirical sensations. Rather, according to Kant, aesthetic judgment is the capacity to approach or relate to an object according to a principle of purposiveness. An object is considered purposive when it accords with its own nature or its intrinsic end. However, an object may also be purposive in a merely formal or subjective sense—that is, when it harmonizes with the nature of the subject’s faculty of judgment. In raising the issue in this way, Kant emphasizes the determining role of the subjective element within the entire framework of aesthetic relations.

Whereas traditional aesthetics prior to I. Kant centered its attention on establishing the objective foundations of the Beautiful, Kant, by contrast, focused primarily on analyzing the subjective conditions under which human beings apprehend an object as beautiful. Similar to his conception of the cognitive subject, he employs the a priori element to reconcile empiricism and rationalism in constructing the notion of the aesthetic subject. The a priori ground of the Beautiful, according to him, lies in the faculty of reflective judgment. He formulates four paradoxical propositions concerning the judgment of the Beautiful: First, the Beautiful is a pleasure without interest; second, the Beautiful possesses universality without a concept—while concepts always entail universality and vice versa; third, the Beautiful is purposiveness without purpose; and fourth, the Beautiful is necessary yet subjective. Kant draws upon important categories from epistemology and employs paradoxes to highlight the unique nature of aesthetic judgment. These four paradoxes are grounded in the capacity to communicate universally the assumption that all human beings share the same mental disposition—namely, a disposition attuned to the experience of the Beautiful. This mental disposition consists of three faculties: sensibility, understanding, and imagination. According to Kant, imagination synthesizes the sensory data gathered through sensibility, guided by the understanding. In the cognitive judgment of the epistemological subject, understanding plays the dominant role; however, in aesthetic judgment, it is not the understanding that is central, but rather the harmonious interplay of all three faculties—sensibility, understanding, and imagination. Hence, aesthetic judgment, as produced by the aesthetic subject, is a free play of these three faculties. In this way, I. Kant transcends the boundaries of rationalism and the Enlightenment, paving the way for the emergence of Romanticism and the development of transcendental idealism.

For I. Kant, art contains what he calls the aesthetic idea. The idea of reason is an abstract concept that sensibility and understanding, as faculties of the cognitive subject, are incapable of attaining—this is the realm of the “thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*), comprising the universe, the immortal soul, and God. By contrast, the aesthetic idea is something that no rational concept can fully encompass. This notion of Kant has profoundly influenced hermeneutics in its exploration of the polysemy of art and the horizon of expectation in aesthetic reception. In his conception of the aesthetic human being, Kant elucidates how a person can genuinely become the master of their own life in this world—not through a negative or authoritarian mode of existence, but in the manner of a creative artista.

Thus, through his critical philosophical system, I. Kant seeks to affirm that the human being, as a cognitive subject, is capable of transcending empirical knowledge to attain scientific knowledge—that is, a priori knowledge. Human reason rises beyond mere maxims of action to grasp the a priori moral law, thereby fulfilling the vocation of the free moral person. In investigating the human capacity for transcendental judgment, we observe that this faculty enables individuals to transcend ordinary empirical sensations and attain transcendent feelings—such as the feeling of the Beautiful, as well as the recognition of the marvelous order of the universe and all its phenomena.

The historical impact of Kant's cognitive subject is evident in subsequent developments in German idealism, phenomenology, and critical theory. His notion of reason's autonomy inspired both philosophical idealism and liberal humanism. However, critics such as Hegel and Marx argued that Kant's abstract subject fails to capture the dialectical interdependence between thought and material conditions. From a historical materialist perspective, Kant's cognitive subject represents a pivotal yet limited stage—a necessary moment in the evolution of epistemology that must be surpassed to grasp the full potential of human knowledge grounded in praxis.

Conclusion

Through the critical method, I. Kant constructed the cognitive subject with distinctive and groundbreaking characteristics, making a substantial contribution to the development of epistemological theory. He shifted the focus from the object—the external world—to the subject of cognition itself. This shift marks a revolutionary transformation in epistemology. From this point of departure, the cognitive subject in Kant's philosophy bears specific features: it is not a passive recipient of external stimuli but an active, dynamic, and creative agent. Across the three stages of cognition—sensibility, understanding, and reason—the subject both receives the impact of the objective world and simultaneously constructs the object of knowledge. However, this cognitive subject must ultimately halt before the realm of the “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich), which delineates the boundary of human knowledge. The cognitive subject in Kant's philosophy also raises the issue of dialectical logic. Although Kant did not fully develop a dialectical logic, his critique of the limitations of formal logic and his formulation of transcendental logic constitutes a profound contribution, laying the groundwork for subsequent philosophers to advance dialectical reasoning. The cognitive subject in Kant's thought is characterized by a peculiar form of unknowability. He affirms the limits of human cognition not to diminish human intellect, but rather as a unique and profound means of exalting it. Another salient feature of the cognitive subject in Kant's philosophy is its inseparability from the moral subject and the aesthetic subject. These three dimensions—cognition, morality, and aesthetics—constitute the essential aspects of human life. Their integration forms a unified, harmonious whole: the complete and perfected human being.

However, it must also be acknowledged that I. Kant addressed the cognitive subject primarily in the form of the individual human being—generalized, abstract, and ahistorical. His approach to the cognitive subject as an individual lends a markedly subjective character to his epistemological theory. By overlooking the productive labor activity of human beings, Kant restricted human action to the realm of the spirit alone. He also did not consider the human being as humanity—as a species-being—and thus only recognized the finite cognitive capacity of the individual, without grasping the potentially infinite cognitive capacity of humankind. Since Kant's cognitive subject is the individual, his theory accounts only for individual experience, without acknowledging the role of social experience transmitted across generations and preserved in the collective memory of humanity. As a result, his theory gravitates toward agnosticism. Had he approached the cognitive subject from the standpoint of the human being as a social being, he could have recognized the possibility of infinite cognition. Indeed, considered as an individual, the human being has a finite existence; in the course of their lifetime, one can only acquire knowledge within the limits permitted by their historical context. But the human being as a social being—humanity—has an infinite existence, in which successive generations expand the horizon of knowledge over time. That which Kant considered the unknowable “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich) in one era may well become knowable in another. This constitutes the most significant limitation in Kant's conception of the cognitive subject.

Kant's conception of the cognitive subject laid the foundation for modern epistemology, particularly in its emphasis on autonomy, critique, and the active role of reason. Yet this legacy is twofold: while it empowered the subject as a locus of knowledge, it also abstracted human cognition from material history and social relations. Later thinkers—from Hegel to Marx—would inherit Kant's dialectical impulse while overcoming his ahistorical and individualistic limitations, repositioning cognition within collective human activity and concrete socio-historical contexts.

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