Kant and Spontaneity
The Absolute-Relative Debate

Kant says in the B-deduction that the representation of the ‘I think’ is an ‘act of spontaneity’, and must be able to accompany all representations of the subject (B132). Commentators have puzzled over how the ‘act of spontaneity’ should be interpreted. One key debate here concerns the question of whether the involvement of this act of spontaneity allows the cognizing subject to bring forth a causality not reducible to prior causes.

Kant characterizes absolute spontaneity as ‘the faculty of beginning a state, and hence also a series of consequences’ (KrV, A445/B473). Henry Allison and Robert Pippin argue that Kant takes spontaneity involved in cognition to be absolute, because a discursive intellect requires self-conscious activity to experience causal events. Allison argues that the transcendental self must be absolutely spontaneous, because it actively rather than passively recognizes reasons as reasons (Allison 1996: 63). Pippin (1987: 465-66) argues that the self-conscious subject must be able to think together events in inner sense, and that this synthesis must be actively made, and not passively acquired.

In opposition to this view, Wilfrid Sellars argues that the transcendental subject must be conceived as possessing merely relative spontaneity. On this view, although the subject is conscious of itself as spontaneous in synthesizing empirical objects, this spontaneity is merely relative, because it is ‘set in motion…[by] foreign causes’ (Sellars 1971: 23). Kant describes it as the ‘freedom…of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself’ (CPracR, 5: 97). In Sellars’ view, the relative nature of discursive spontaneity lies in its emergence in response to external stimuli, and these stimuli must be synthesized in accordance with the subject’s logical dispositions (Sellars 1971: 25).