

## **On the Very Idea of an Account of a Self-Conscious Capacity**

Stephen Engstrom's account of the form of practical knowledge rests in part on his development of the concept of the self-conscious capacity to judge. In this paper, I will focus on that concept. I will argue that as Engstrom develops it, our original conception of it contains the recognition of the *logical* possibility that the capacity is liable to error. On the other hand, it is essential that our original conception of that capacity not involve the recognition of the *real* possibility that the capacity is liable to error. The latter recognition, Engstrom maintains, is *a posteriori*: it requires the experience of an actual failure of the capacity. Our original conception of the self-conscious capacity to judge must, then, be such that we can distinguish between what is logically and what is really possible for it. That distinction rests solely on the fact that the capacity to judge is a capacity, and does not yet involve any appreciation of its self-conscious character. In the second part of my paper, I examine that characteristic of the capacity to judge and try to argue that bringing in self-consciousness raises questions about how to understand the account Kant and Engstrom have provided of the capacity to judge. In particular, I argue that the account cannot itself consist in acts of that capacity, but also that it must consist in acts of that capacity. Resolution of this contradiction, I suggest, requires developing an understanding of the activity of philosophy which goes beyond any found in Kant.

### **I: Capacity**

In his development of the concept of a self-conscious capacity, Engstrom claims that the very idea of a capacity requires that we make sense of it as determined in its acts. A capacity is general, and its generality lies in its being a kind of explanation for different acts: the capacity, as a form, "is common to all possible employments of the capacity, independently of how the

capacity is exercised” (132).<sup>1</sup> Further, employments of the capacity must differ from one another. What differentiates the different employments cannot be the capacity itself, since the capacity is precisely what is common to all employments of it. Hence, different employments must determine the capacity in different ways. And so it is internal to the very idea of a capacity that it is determined in its acts.

That a capacity is determined in its acts entails that, in a particular employment of a capacity, the capacity could be determined otherwise. This particular employment of the capacity is not necessitated by the very idea of the capacity. For the capacity is determined in the employment, and that means that the employment contains material or content which is not present in the bare idea of the capacity in question. Such an employment thus involves a synthesis of the capacity with some matter not contained in the very idea of the capacity. In the case of the capacity to judge, Kant’s name for this synthesis is synthetic judgment. As Engstrom puts it, “A capacity’s exercise cannot be conceived as determined except as it is possible at least to conceive of the capacity’s being exercised otherwise than as it is determined, and in the case of a capacity to judge, this is as much as to say that the judgments arising through its determination are synthetic, judgments to which contradictory thoughts can be opposed” (131).

The final part of this quotation makes explicit that the synthesis involved in the determination of the capacity to judge is such that the contradictory synthesis is at least thinkable. This follows from the idea of the determination as a synthesis: the matter with which the capacity is united in the particular employment is not matter we can know to be united with the capacity simply from an analysis of the capacity itself. Hence, it is at least non-contradictory that the capacity be determined not merely in another employment, standing in an indeterminate

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<sup>1</sup> Engstrom is here talking about specifically self-conscious capacities, but I believe this point generalizes to all capacities, self-conscious or not. Page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to: Stephen Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

relation to the actual act of the capacity, but rather in an employment which is logically incompatible with the actual act of the capacity. The relation of logical incompatibility that belongs specifically to the capacity to judge is contradiction. Hence, for any determination of the capacity to judge in an act, it is at least thinkable that the capacity judge the contradictory of that act instead.

It belongs to our original conception of a capacity, then, that for any employment of it, a logically incompatible employment of it is thinkable. In the case of the capacity to judge, any time it is determined to a judgment, it is thinkable that it be determined instead to the contradictory judgment. Further, what is thereby revealed to be logically possible is that the capacity can issue forth in *erroneous* judgments. For judgment, unlike bare thought, is such that its employments are not arbitrary: as judgment is the combination of representations, Engstrom puts this point by saying that in judgment (but not in thought) the “combination of representations is non-arbitrary” (101). Thus, the capacity to judge is such that in its employment in a particular judgment it excludes the contradictory judgment as false. And so the logical possibility that the capacity to judge is employed in the contradictory judgment is the logical possibility that the capacity to judge err. For example: I judge, knowingly, that the sun is up. It is internal to our original conception of the capacity to judge that it is logically possible that I judge instead, erroneously, that the sun is not up.

This might seem to conflict with Engstrom’s claim that “it is only through [the] discovery of actual error that we come to recognize that our judgments *can* be in error,” as opposed to through reflection on the very idea of the capacity to judge (109). However, the sense of “can be” in question in this passage is not that of logical possibility, but rather that of real possibility. Engstrom’s argument is that we cannot conceive of the *real* possibility of error, or the actual

misuse of the capacity to judge, simply through reflection on judgment. Indeed, this must be his argument, for as we've seen if we did not know even the logical possibility of error from reflection on the original capacity to judge than we could not conceive of that capacity as determined in a manifold of acts. But we can further confirm that this must be his argument by bringing out the grounds for thinking that the possibility of error is not known through reflection on the capacity to judge alone.

When we conceive of a capacity, we conceive of it in terms of what it is able to do. The ability to do something might be hampered or impeded in some way, but what explains its being impeded is precisely not the capacity itself. Rather, we recognize the impediment as coming from outside of the capacity. For a capacity to "hinder itself" would be for it simultaneously to strive to do something and not strive to do that very thing, and that is a contradiction. One way to put this is to note that it is not a mere accident if a capacity is exercised successfully, but it is an accident (with respect to the nature of the capacity at least) if it is exercised *unsuccessfully*. So, there is a logical priority to the successful case, such that our original conception of it does not explain its failure.

This is the ground Engstrom appeals to when he explains why the possibility of error is not part of the original conception of the capacity to judge (cf. 108-111). It is also implicit in Kant's claim that "no force of nature can of itself depart from its own laws" (A294/B350) and his account of error as having to arise not from the understanding *alone* but rather from the unnoticed influence of sensibility *on* the understanding. We need to appeal to the interaction between the capacity and other actually or possibly existing things to explain its failure. And that means that we are talking about real as opposed to logical possibility: for real possibility concerns, as Kant notes, the conditions on the existence of something, and so concerns the way

in which it fits into the whole of our experience (cf. A234/B286). Hence, it is the real possibility of error that requires knowing about the way in which the capacity interacts with other things. From an account of the capacity alone we can determine the logical possibility of error, though not its real possibility.

## **II: Self-Consciousness**

So far, I have not yet invoked the self-conscious character of the capacity to judge, but instead relied only on the fact that it is a capacity. Reflecting just on that, we have seen that the original conception of the capacity to judge must involve the distinction between logical and real possibility. Without this distinction, we would either be unable to understand the generality of the capacity as explaining genuinely different acts, or we would be unable to understand the logical priority of the successful employment of the capacity over any misuse of it. In either case, we would lose our grip on the very idea of the capacity to judge as a capacity. In what follows, I want to bring into focus the self-consciousness of the capacity to judge and raise some questions about how it can be made compatible with the distinction between logical and real possibility that comes with the idea of a capacity. I think that the character of the capacity as self-conscious stands in some tension with its character as a capacity, and I want to try to bring out this tension (in what will be a still quite inarticulate way).

The capacity to judge is self-conscious, such that what the capacity to judge is conscious of (i.e., its judgments) “is not anything that can exist prior to, or independently of, that consciousness” (99). That means, Engstrom says, that there is nothing belonging to the nature of the capacity of which the capacity is not conscious (99). So, where above I have been talking about our original conception of the capacity to judge, we can now talk about the capacity’s

original conception of itself. As a further consequence of its self-consciousness, Engstrom notes that the capacity to judge is spontaneous (100). That is, the capacity is not determined to its employments by anything other than itself: rather, it determines itself. His argument for this conclusion rests on two thoughts: first, the thought that a self-conscious capacity, as a capacity, is present in a manifold and, second, the thought that any manifold in which a self-conscious capacity is present must be a self-conscious unity. For the manifold to be a self-conscious unity, it cannot merely be the united consciousness of a manifold – for then, what one is conscious of is not something one is conscious of as oneself, and so we do not yet have a self-conscious unity of the manifold. Rather, one needs each component of the manifold to itself be self-conscious, and one needs the self-consciousness in each of the components to be “a *single* self-same consciousness” (99). As that “single self-same consciousness” is the self-consciousness of the capacity to judge, the components of the manifold must issue forth *from* the capacity to judge. Hence, the capacity to judge is spontaneous, or determines itself in its different employments.

The self-conception of the capacity to judge, as a capacity, is conscious of its dependence for its exercise on matter. For, recall, the capacity can only explain what is common to all of its exercises. Since those exercises are genuinely different from one another, it must be given whatever in its exercises differentiates them from one another. Engstrom, following Kant, calls that matter “sensibility,” and claims that it serves as an enabling condition for the self-determination of the capacity to judge (105-6). Moreover, since the capacity to judge is conscious that it is logically possible for it to err in its exercises, the capacity to judge is conscious of an original, if only notional, division in itself. The capacity divides into whatever it is that characterizes a mere act of the capacity (for instance, in the case of the will: acting) and the truth or perhaps validity of that act (acting well). These two features are originally united in

the capacity to judge, but they are nonetheless distinct because the capacity to judge can at least think their coming apart.<sup>2</sup>

I think the above suggests the following conclusion: the distinction between real and logical possibility only makes sense when applied to acts of the capacity to judge – it does not make sense when applied to the form of those acts, or to the capacity itself. The capacity to judge, as self-conscious, constitutes the original conception of itself. This self-conception is not itself “subject” to the distinction between the logically and really possible. Rather, it constitutes the notional distinction between the logically and really possible as characteristics of its acts (containing, as they must, matter not to be found in the original conception of the capacity to judge). The original conception grounds the distinction between the two. In other words, the distinction between logical and real possibility only has its sense when applied to acts of the power of judgment; it lacks sense to ask whether, for instance, the capacity to judge itself is really or logically possible.

If that is correct, then it suggests that we ought not conceive of philosophy as proceeding via an analysis of the concept of the capacity to judge, though that is the way of understanding both Kant and Engstrom that I find to be most natural. It cannot be right, however, because the capacity to judge is self-constituting, and common to all of our acts. In philosophy, it of course figures as an explicit concept, which seems to get deployed as part of the content of various kinds of acts of our capacity to judge. But that understanding of it alienates. I think Hegel may have something like this in mind when he criticizes Kant for leaving nothing to the I “but this appearance of the “I think” that accompanies all representations and of which we do *not have the slightest concept*” (12.194), though in Hegel’s terminology, “concept” is not something which

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Andrea Kern, *Quellen des Wissens* (Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 2006), 201-2. Like Engstrom, Kern claims that there is a logical priority to the successful exercise of a capacity and that this entails that the real possibility of error is known (if at all) only *a posteriori*: cf. Kern, 157-8.

gets employed in acts of the capacity to judge, so I'm not sure if I have correctly understood him here. The idea that we are instead reflectively articulating something we know simply in virtue of being a thinker seems like an attractive alternative – I have heard other people talk in this way, and I have myself tried to employ this language. But I do not think I grasp it, certainly not what it means in Kant. For the method of this reflective articulation cannot be by appeal to an analysis of the concept of the capacity to judge. And yet if it is not that, what is it? And if an analysis of the concept of the capacity to judge does not characterize what I have been doing in this paper, then it is not clear to me how we should think about the distinction between logical and real possibility, or how we should think about the capacity to judge.

But perhaps there is a deeper reason to be concerned with the account of the capacity to judge developed above, one once again brought out by Hegel – this time in a much more famous passage. Hegel claims that the critical philosophy was right to turn to examine our cognitive capacities. However, he argues, it was wrong to conceive of the activity of examining our cognitive capacities as occurring prior to an examination of “the truth,” contending instead that an examination of the capacities just is an examination of the truth. This criticism is very puzzling: why is Hegel so fixated on the kind of cognition we have of our own cognitive powers? And why does he seem to think that Kant didn't recognize that we cognize our powers by employing those very powers? In fact, this seems like the heart of Kantianism, with its insistence on the spontaneity of the capacity to judge.

I think there's something to Hegel's criticism, however. Consider this version of it: “Certainly the forms of thinking should not be used without investigation; but this process of investigation is itself a process of cognition. So the activity of the forms of thinking, and the critique of them, must be united within the process of cognition” (*Encyclopedia Logic*, §41

Addition 1). In this passage, Hegel claims that the activity of the forms of thinking must be united with the critique of them. That is, the capacity to judge must be united with whatever it is that Kant, Engstrom, and (in a vastly inferior way) I have been doing in reflectively articulating that capacity. Why must these two activities be united? Because, Hegel says, the forms of thinking “investigate themselves” (ibid.). So, they must be united, Hegel seems to be saying, because the capacity to judge is self-conscious. Properly appreciating the Kantian insight that the capacity to judge is self-conscious, then, requires unifying the activity of the capacity to judge with the activity of the philosophical cognition of it.

That is, the activity of reflectively articulating the capacity to judge is an activity of that capacity. But the capacity to judge, as a *capacity*, essentially understands its own acts as containing matter not provided for by the very form of the capacity. But that is a contradiction: for the capacity to judge is, as a capacity, what is common to all acts of the capacity – it cannot contain matter not present in all of those acts. Hence, the self-conscious character of the capacity to judge contradicts its character as a capacity.

The conclusion is not to reject or give up on the capacity to judge, which we are all self-consciously aware of possessing. Rather, the conclusion is that the self-consciousness present in the capacity to judge does not constitute itself in an act of a capacity but rather in a way which does not tolerate the division into capacity and act – perhaps because it is pure act.<sup>3</sup> Hence, what is called for is a different account of self-consciousness and, with it, our cognitive capacities - one that does not divide into an account of the form of what is logically possible and the form of what is really possible. That is, what is called for is a logic which overcomes the division – demanded by the very idea of a capacity – into general and transcendental.

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<sup>3</sup> In this light, Hegel claims that Kant’s criticism of the rational psychology “appears all the more lame and empty when compared with the profounder ideas of ancient philosophy concerning the concept of the soul or of thinking, as for instance the truly speculative ideas of Aristotle” (12.195).

Even if all of this turns out to be nonsense, I think it is important to register that Hegel's concern with the nature of philosophical cognition – that is, in Kant, the status of the reflective articulation of the capacity to judge – does not reflect some idiosyncratic obsession with method on his part. Rather, it goes to the heart of the matter. For until we have a satisfying account of our activity as philosophers and its relation to our activity as judges, we cannot really have properly appreciated the significance of the self-consciousness of our cognitive capacities.