According to Charles Taylor (1989), the opposition between humanity’s self-determining capacities and nature’s deterministic laws characterizes modernity from the outset. An early and seminal formulation of this opposition can be found in René Descartes’ differentiation of res cogitans (thinking substance) from res extensio (extended substance). Having thus divided the world into ‘immaterial thoughts’ and ‘unthinking matter’ Descartes is concerned to account for how the former can obtain ‘objective’ knowledge of the latter. However, while Descartes’ cogito ergo sum provides the template for subsequent attempts to achieve self-certain knowledge, he is unable to bridge the gap between ‘thought’ and ‘being’ except by recourse to a benign divinity (Descartes 1968, p. 158).

To resolve this problem Kant argues that if ‘subjects’ can only acquire certain knowledge of themselves then ‘objectively’ valid knowledge is possible only if subjects constitute the objectively knowable world. Kant refers to this as his ‘Copernican revolution’, although he actually restores humanity to the centre of the knowable universe. Thus, while agreeing with David Hume that the universal and necessary structure of causality is ‘something that exists in the mind, not in objects’ (Hume 1978, p. 165), Kant rejects Hume’s contention that the structure of the mind is formed by ‘custom’ (ibid., p. 170). On the contrary, argues Kant, the human mind is the repository of rational categories which comprise the transcendental conditions for the possibility of objectively valid knowledge. Kant then seeks – by means of a ‘transcendental deduction’ – to uncover the role played by rational subjects in the constitution of the world.
The Kantian subject

Having accepted Descartes’ original diremption of the world into subjects and objects, Kant argues that, as transcendental subjects, we act on the noumenal world of ‘things in themselves’ to produce the phenomenal world we experience as empirical subjects. To this extent, it is the self-identical ‘subject’ – in its role as the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’ – that unifies the manifold of sensibilities, which flow from ‘things in themselves’, although the activity of synthesis which ultimately unifies the noumenal world belongs to the ‘transcendental faculty of the imagination’ (Einbildungskraft). To this extent, argues Kant, ‘the principle of the necessary unity of pure (productive) synthesis of imagination, prior to apperception, is the ground of the possibility of all knowledge, especially of experience’ (ibid., p. 143).

In the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason Kant places great emphasis on the productive capacity of the self-synthesizing subject. ‘This synthesis is an action [Wirkung] of the understanding on the sensibility; and is its first application – and thereby the ground of all its other applications – to the objects of our possible intuition’ (ibid., p. 165). It follows that the objective world – as ruled by Newtonian laws – emerges from the ‘self-activity’ of the subject’s ‘productive imagination’ (ibid., p. 152). Thus, although it may sound exaggerated and absurd ‘to say that the understanding is itself the source of the laws of nature, and so of its formal unity, such an assertion is none the less correct, and is in keeping with the object to which it refers, namely, experience’ (ibid., p. 148). On this basis Kant claims to have reconciled the heteronomous character of the Newtonian universe with the autonomy of human subjects. This claim, however, rests on a bifurcated account of human subjectivity in which there is ‘no contradiction in supposing that one and the same will is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, necessarily subject to the law of nature, and so far not free, while yet, as belonging to a thing in itself, it is not subject to the law, and is therefore free’ (ibid., p. 28).

However, in the sphere of moral behaviour – where (pure) practical reason prevails – Kant argues that it is only possible to preserve the autonomy of human beings by abstracting from the heteronomy of the material world. Thus despite arguing that objectively valid knowledge is possible only if ‘pure reason’ is informed by