

KANT'S THEORY OF SYNTHESIS

Dissertation Abstract

One of the main topics Kant is concerned with in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the relation between thought and perception, or, in Kant's own terminology, between understanding and sensibility. Kant regards these as the two fundamental cognitive powers, and he takes it to be among his most important achievements in the *Critique* to have correctly determined the nature of these powers as well as the relation they bear to each other. Indeed, he claims that it is this achievement which enabled him to advance over the philosophical positions of his most prominent predecessors, on both the Empiricist and the Rationalist side.¹ Yet exactly how the relation between understanding and sensibility ought to be conceived, according to Kant, is unclear. On the one hand, he claims that understanding and sensibility are distinct, and indeed *heterogeneous*, capacities. This claim is crucial to his critique of both Empiricism and Rationalism. On the other hand, he is concerned to show that intuitions, the acts of sensibility, themselves *involve* the understanding. This claim is no less crucial: Kant's justification of the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge demands it. How are these two claims to be reconciled? The aim of this dissertation is to propose an answer to this question by developing a new interpretation of Kant's conception of the understanding, the capacity of thought.

¹ Thus, Kant says: "[...] Leibniz *intellectualized* the appearances, just as Locke *sensualized* all the concepts of the understanding [...]. Instead of seeking two entirely different sources of representation in the understanding and sensibility, which could judge about things with objective validity *only in conjunction*, each of these great men holds on only to one of them, which in his opinion is immediately related to things in themselves, while the other does nothing but confuse or order the representations of the first" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A271/B327).

I approach the problem of reconciling the two claims by focusing on the theory of synthesis. In one of its uses, the term ‘synthesis’ denotes any exercise of the understanding. Let *sensible synthesis* be that exercise of the understanding by means of which it is involved in intuitions. To understand the nature of this involvement, then, we must focus on the theory of sensible synthesis.

Kant’s view that the understanding is involved in intuition is motivated by the idea that a merely sensory capacity cannot on its own account for the kind of structure that representations which have genuine cognitive significance must exhibit. According to this idea, the mere having of a sensory impression does not by itself constitute the sensory representation of an object in perception. Rather, for perception to supply us with representations of objects, and thus with representations that have genuine cognitive significance, what is given in perception must exhibit a certain structure. To give an example, one aspect of this structure is that an object must be presented as something that endures through time and that can be visually perceived from different locations in space. Kant’s idea, then, is that if perceptions exhibit such a structure they cannot be conceived as the acts of a merely sensory capacity. In Kantian jargon, this is the idea that intuitions are representations of objects only if they exhibit categorial unity; and that categorial unity cannot be conceived as something for which the acts of a merely receptive capacity could account. This commitment on Kant’s part is an expression of what I call the Spontaneity Thesis.

For intuitions to have genuine cognitive significance, then, the understanding must be involved in the actualizations of sensibility. The act by which it is so involved is sensible synthesis. However, at least on the face of it, this kind of involvement conflicts

with the heterogeneity of sensibility and understanding. To say that sensibility and understanding are heterogeneous is to say that they each have their own form, where this means that the acts of each capacity exhibit a number of essential characteristics that are distinctive of acts of this capacity. One way to spell this out would be to say that the understanding is a capacity for judgment and that judgment exhibits a kind of structure that is *sui generis* with respect to the characteristic structure of intuitions, the representations of sensibility. Conversely, intuitions exhibit a structure that is distinct from, and irreducible to, the characteristic structure of judgments. But if the understanding is a capacity for judgment, then the act of sensible synthesis by means of which it is involved in intuition must be an act of judgment. And this seems to confer on intuitions the characteristic structure of judgment. Clearly, this is incompatible with the claim that intuitions are heterogeneous to judgments.

If this problem is to be avoided, sensible synthesis must be distinct from judgment. It must be such as to preserve the distinctively sensible structure of intuition. But this makes it hard to see what makes sensible synthesis, so conceived, an act of the understanding, whose paradigmatic act seems to be judgment. I call the problem of making intelligible how sensible synthesis can be distinct in structure from judgment and yet be an act of the understanding, the spontaneous capacity of the mind, the Unity Problem. To bring out the nature as well as the urgency of the Unity Problem for Kant, and to develop a solution to it, is the task of this dissertation.

The strategy I pursue for developing a solution to the Unity Problem is to argue that the understanding should not be conceived as being exclusively a capacity for judgment. Rather, it should be conceived as fundamentally a capacity for what I call apperceptive

synthesis. Judgment is one kind of apperceptive synthesis, while sensible synthesis is another, distinct kind of apperceptive synthesis. My solution to the Unity Problem, then, takes the form of arguing that judgment and sensible synthesis should be conceived as two distinct species of a single genus.

The chief advantage of this solution to the Unity Problem is that it allows us to do justice both to the Spontaneity Thesis and to the heterogeneity of sensibility and understanding. And this makes it possible to give an accurate account of Kant's distinctive conception of the relation between sensory capacities and rational capacities in a human being. The main challenge facing this solution is to make a convincing case that the spontaneous capacity of the mind is indeed best conceived as a capacity for apperceptive synthesis. This requires me not only to show that there is evidence for such a view in Kant's texts, but also to make the case that both judgment and sensible synthesis are plausibly conceived as acts of such a capacity.

In the literature on the *First Critique*, the Unity Problem has not been adequately addressed. Indeed, it is hardly perceived as a problem. The main reason for this is a widespread misconception of the way in which judgment relates to intuition. Kant's famous slogan, according to which intuitions without concepts are blind, while thoughts without content are empty (call it Kant's Slogan), is frequently taken to imply that intuitions and concepts must be thought of as components of every act of cognition. A natural way of spelling out this alleged implication is to think of the fundamental act of cognition as taking the form of a judgment in which a concept is predicated of an intuition. Intuition is thus conceived as a component of judgment.

In Chapter One of the dissertation, I argue that this construal of the role of intuition in Kant's theory of cognition is mistaken. The primary role of intuition for Kant is not that of a component of judgment. Those features of Kant's position that appear to support such a view depend for their plausibility on an anachronistic conception of Kant's theory of judgment. They appear to support the component view of intuition only against the background of reading into Kant a Fregean conception of judgment, according to which the structure of an atomic judgment is that of a Fregean concept and a Fregean object (*Fa*). I show that Kant does not hold a Fregean conception of judgment but rather the traditional Aristotelian conception, according to which the fundamental form of judgment is that of a concept's being predicated of another concept by means of the copula. If this is right, then the primary motivation for interpreting Kant's Slogan along the lines of the component view of intuition breaks down. The path is thus cleared for conceiving the cooperation between intuitions and concepts that Kant's Slogan demands in a different way.

In Chapter Two I argue that the cognitive function of intuition is to furnish sensible presentations of objects, or as Kant puts it, to "give objects to the mind" (cf. A50/B74). On the view I defend, objects can be given to the mind (hence intuitions can occur) without any concurrent acts of judgment. Accordingly, the cooperation demanded by Kant's Slogan does not take the form of concurrent acts of intuiting and judging. Rather, what the Slogan demands is that for a judgment to have content the object it is about must also be the object of a possible intuition. In other words, it must be possible for the object of a judgment to be given in intuition. This entails that judgment bears an internal relation to intuition, yet not the kind of relation envisioned by the component view of intuition.

Based on this conception of the relation judgment bears to intuition I develop an account of the categories, or pure concepts of the understanding. I argue that the role of the categories in Kant's account can be considered from two perspectives. From the perspective of judgment the categories express the condition that a judgment, to be contentful, must be about an object of possible intuition. From the perspective of intuition the categories express the condition that an intuition, to be the representation of an object and thus have cognitive significance, must be such that its content can be articulated in judgment. Accordingly, a judgment is non-empty only if its object instantiates the categories. Conversely, an intuition has objective purport and is thus able to play the role of giving an object to the mind only if its content instantiates the categories. The doctrine of the categories thus captures the relation between judgment and intuition that is expressed in Kant's Slogan.

For the categories to be valid of intuition, as Kant sometimes puts it, is for intuition to exhibit the kind of unity that is necessary for an intuition to be the representation of an object. Call this categorial unity. According to the Spontaneity Thesis, intuitions exhibit categorial unity only as the result of an act of spontaneity. This is the act of sensible synthesis. The component view of intuition takes the act of sensible synthesis to be an act of judgment. But if the component view is false, then sensible synthesis need not be an act of judgment, and indeed there is ample textual evidence that Kant does not think of it as an act of judgment. If this is right, then Kant is committed to the idea of an act of spontaneity that does not take the form of judgment. But this generates a problem. Our primary conception of what spontaneity (equivalently, the understanding) is for Kant is that it is a capacity for judgment. Yet how can a capacity for judgment also be responsible for an act

that is specifically distinct from judgment, viz. the act of sensible synthesis? This is the Unity Problem.

Having brought the Unity Problem clearly into view, I begin to work towards a solution by asking what motivates Kant to hold the Spontaneity Thesis; specifically, what motivates him to embrace the view that even the kind of unity that is distinctive of intuitions, the representations of sensibility, is dependent on acts of spontaneity. This is the topic of Chapter Three. In response to this question I argue that Kant's conception of cognition as the non-accidental agreement between a representation and its object requires that the possession of the relevant unity on the part of intuitions depends on acts of spontaneity, given his view that judgment is an act of spontaneity. Because Kant holds that the unity of judgment has its source in the spontaneous capacity of the mind, he is committed to holding that the unity of intuition, which is the sensible analogue of the unity of judgment, has its source in this capacity as well. Appreciating this connection makes visible that the Unity Problem arises from some of Kant's most deeply held commitments.

Being cognizant of this fact brings out the urgency of the Unity Problem, but it does not yet tell us how to solve this problem. However, it is clear what shape the solution must take: What we need is a characterization of spontaneity (the understanding) that makes it intelligible how this capacity can admit of two distinct acts; that is, how it can be both a capacity for judgment and a capacity for sensible synthesis. In Chapter Four I argue that the doctrine of apperception contains the materials for a characterization of the understanding that achieves this. Most fundamentally, the understanding is a capacity for apperceptive synthesis. According to the account I develop in Chapter Four, a capacity for apperceptive synthesis is a self-conscious capacity for combination. It is a capacity to

effect the representation of a unified manifold by means of a consciousness of its own form. The form of a capacity for combination is what I call a mode of combination. The logical forms of judgment Kant distinguishes in the so-called Table of Judgments are an example of such modes of combination. Since for Kant the capacity to judge is a capacity to combine concepts by means of the consciousness of the logical forms of judgment, the capacity to judge is a capacity to combine representations by means of a consciousness of its own form. Judgment can be understood, therefore, as an act of the capacity for apperceptive synthesis.

However, I maintain that, in addition to judgment, the capacity for apperceptive synthesis can also be exercised in a distinct act of specifically sensible synthesis. I make the case for this claim in Chapter Five. I argue, first, that sensible synthesis as Kant conceives it is modeled on what he calls the construction of a concept in Euclidean geometry. To understand Kant's conception of sensible synthesis, therefore, we need to understand his views on geometrical construction. I argue that Kant thinks of the construction of a geometrical concept as a rule-governed procedure for generating pure intuitions. The rules that govern this procedure can be understood as what I call sensible modes of combination. Accordingly, the capacity to construct geometrical concepts is a capacity to generate the representation of a unified intuitional manifold by means of the consciousness of a mode of combination. It is therefore a self-conscious capacity for combination, hence a capacity for apperceptive synthesis.

Consideration of Kant's conception of geometrical construction not only shows that construction can be made intelligible as an act of the capacity for apperceptive synthesis, but also brings out the distinctively sensible nature of this act. In constructing a

geometrical concept one generates what Kant calls the representation of a magnitude. Magnitudes for Kant exhibit a characteristic that it is impossible to represent by conceptual means. This is the characteristic of sheer numerical diversity, that is, numerical diversity coupled with qualitative identity. According to Kant's traditional view of concepts, it is impossible to represent sheer numerical diversity by means of concepts alone.

Since sensible synthesis in general is modeled on geometrical construction, this shows that sensible synthesis in general can be understood as an act of the capacity for apperceptive synthesis. If this is right, then the characterization of the understanding, the spontaneous faculty of the mind, as a capacity for apperceptive synthesis is the fundamental characterization of this capacity. It is the fundamental characterization because it allows us to comprehend that this capacity admits of two distinct exercises, judgment and sensible synthesis, and thus to solve the Unity Problem.

This shows that what is demanded by an interpretation of Kant's theory of cognition which does justice both to the Spontaneity Thesis and to the heterogeneity of sensibility and understanding is a new conception of the understanding. This capacity must not be conceived, as the majority of commentators hold, as exclusively a capacity for judgment. Rather, judgment must be construed as only one of its exercises (albeit the paradigmatic one) among several. Specifically, the understanding must be conceived as capable of an act that is distinct in structure from judgment, yet equally spontaneous. I argue that a conception of the understanding as a capacity for apperceptive synthesis is able to meet these demands. Such a conception is able, therefore, to give adequate expression to Kant's distinctive view of how human perception is informed by rational capacities and thus to do justice to his account of human cognitive capacities.