

Kant's Theory of Perception

Nov 2020

In this paper, I discuss Kant's argument that experience necessarily presupposes the reproducibility of appearances (A 102), and explain how this argument is directed against Hume.

To rephrase the argument, Kant claims the possibility of experience requires that appearances (sensations) are reproducible. First, we need to understand what Kant means by "experience". Experiences are necessarily of objects, and cannot be of sensations alone. This means that an experience would only count as one, if a perceiver could identify objects in their experience. The difference between experience and sensation can be illustrated as follows: when seeing an elaborately painted still-life, we can individuate objects in the painting. On the other hand, when looking at an abstract painting, we can have the sensation of different colors and shapes, but we cannot pick out any objects. Kant argues that we are only capable of experience, in the first case, if we can individuate and organize our sensations into separate objects.

Kant claims that a necessary condition for having an experience is that appearances are reproducible. This means that sensations must have the property of reproducibility. For something to be reproducible, it must progress in time. The flow of time can be thought of as a series of freeze-frames that rapidly succeed one another--each freeze-frame is a reproduction or continuation of its previous one. These frames are always changing in one linear direction, and do not rewind. Sensations reproduce themselves in the same manner as the progression of the freeze-frames--we feel as if there is a smooth continuation from the moment just before and the moment now. Our immediate memories in time are reproduced repeatedly as time flows, so we do not feel like there are any jarring jumps as we progress through time. This is because sensations are reproduced in time, in a linear and unidirectional manner.

Reproducibility alone, however, does not give us a complete account of how experiences of objects come about. We can illustrate how reproducibility alone is not sufficient for experience by drawing an imaginary line which represents sensation. As we continuously draw the line, we erase the drawn portion of the line right after it is drawn. We lose the preceding portion of the line as time progresses, as if we are constantly losing memory of our past sensations. As sensations are reproduced continuously, we need an *a priori* account of what *holds* the sensations together over time. Thus, in order to have experiences, Kant argues that there is a necessary *a priori* principle that holds or synthesizes all of these sensations through time.

For a principle to be *a priori*, its source cannot lie in experience, rather it is brought to experience. This necessary *a priori* principle is what Kant calls the “category of substance”, and is what allows us to hold together all the reproduced sensations over time. With this specific category, substance, we can start to organize our reproduced sensations into recognizable entities--or objects. To repeat, for Kant, our experiences are always of objects. Thus, experience requires that sensations are necessarily reproducible and held together over time, via this *a priori* principle--the category of substance.

David Hume, in agreement with Kant, believes that we bundle appearances or sensations together through time. However, the two philosophers fundamentally disagree on whether or not sensations are bundled together *a priori*. For Hume, there are no necessary *a priori* principles. He sees the bundling of sensations as something we imagine--and as therefore contingent. Hume comes to this conclusion per his empiricist tradition--if one cannot perceive it, it is imaginary. Kant, however, deems that it is necessary that we have *a priori* principles that bundle together appearances. In fact, these principles make our experiences possible in the first place.