

Perception in Hume and Kant

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This paper aims to provide a critical examination of the ways in which David Hume and Immanuel Kant discuss the notion of perception in their respective philosophies. I examine Hume's empirical account of perception in the *Enquiry*¹ and *Treatise*², and Kant's more nuanced account of perception in the A Deduction³ and the 1st Analogy of Experience⁴, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While both philosophers have written about perception beyond the works mentioned so far,⁵ I focus on a specific way to examine the topic; namely, how we get from mere sensations to perceptions of objects. Furthermore, I discuss how both philosophers treat the idea of substance. In this paper, I attempt to answer the following questions: for both philosophers, what does perception entail? Which notion of perception is preferable, and why? Lastly, why is it important that we should prefer one account over the other? I argue that Kant's notion of perception is preferable to that of Hume's because Kant distinguishes mere sensations from perceptions, and grounds our ability to perceive objects in necessary *a priori* principles. In other words, Kant provides an explanation as to how perception is possible in the first place, whereas Hume does not. The preference for Kant's account to Hume's is important because Kant rescues perception from Hume's skepticism, and secures its legitimacy.

Hume's notion of perception is described as follows. For Hume, perception entails "impressions" and the "ideas" that arise from their corresponding impressions.⁶ While they are distinct from each other in terms of their vivacity or liveliness, both impressions and ideas constitute what Hume refers to as a perceptual experience. Impressions are "our more lively

¹ Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.: a Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh U.a.* Indianapolis u.a., IN: Hackett, 1993, 10-28.

² Hume, David. 1978. *Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. 2nd ed. London, England: Oxford University Press.

³ Kant, Immanuel, and Paul Guyer. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009, A99-A111

⁴ Ibid. A176/B218-A189/B232

⁵ Matherne, Samantha. "Images and Kant's Theory of Perception." *Ergo* (Ann Arbor, Mich.) 2, no. 20200916 (2015): *Ergo* (Ann Arbor, Mich.), 2015-12, Vol.2 (20200916).

⁶ Hume, *Enquiry*, 10.

perceptions”, which are the sensations immediately given to us in perception. In other words, it is the content that our senses receive--whether it is visual, auditory, or tangible.⁷ Hume argues, this sense content that we directly receive in perception is more vivid than any of our thoughts or reflections regarding that sense content. The following example illustrates an instance where one has the liveliest possible form of perception. When I take myself to perceive a red apple, the sensation of seeing the redness of the color, feeling the roundness of the shape, or smelling the scent of the apple, are all parts of what constitutes this lively perception, i.e. an impression.

Ideas, on the other hand, are described as “less lively perceptions” or “copies of our impressions.”⁸ They are the reflections which can only arise after we have received some immediate sensation, or an impression. For instance, I see, feel, and smell a red apple that is directly present to me, but the apple is taken away from my perceptual field shortly after. In my mind, I can nonetheless imagine the redness or the roundness of the apple, even if the apple is not right in front of me. My imagined apple would constitute what Hume would call an idea of the apple. Furthermore, this idea of the apple will never reach the same forcefulness or vivacity as an impression of the same apple.⁹

Hume argues that impressions and ideas can be either simple or complex. In the apple example, there are multiple parts that make up the entire impression of the apple. Simple impressions or ideas cannot be reduced further, and they can construct complex impressions or ideas. My impression of the apple is complex, as it is made up by a group of simple impressions: the redness of the skin, the roundness of the shape, and so on. Hume further argues that simple ideas can only be derived from simple impressions.¹⁰ That is, we are incapable of forming simple

⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁸ Ibid, 10.

⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, 10.

ideas without a preceding simple impression. For every simple impression, there is a corresponding simple idea which originates from that impression.¹¹ Further, it is also possible for me to imagine a complex entity that has never been directly presented to me as an impression, i.e. a blue apple. However, Hume argues, this can only happen if I have the preceding simple impressions in which the ideas “blue”¹² and “apple” are derived from. As shown in this example, ideas differ from impressions in that we use our imagination to aid the formation of complex ideas--which means that complex ideas rely on sense content as well as imagination.

Our complex ideas originate from simple impressions, but our imaginations are able to expand on those simple impressions further.¹³ For example, I am able to form a complex idea of a specific table, but also think of that table as the same table from yesterday. However, in perception, I only receive a bundle of sensual or visual content, or an impression of the table. I do not receive the sense content in which my idea of “same table from yesterday” has originated from. The idea of substance, or that something is the same as itself from earlier moments in time, is nowhere to be found in my preceding impressions.¹⁴ This phenomenon shows that there is a gap between our simple impressions and the ideas that can be derived from them, as our imaginations expand on our impressions. Hume argues that the idea of substance is nothing but a collection of simple ideas derived from moments of simple impressions, and they are fictionally held together by our imagination.¹⁵ In other words, substance is something that we have conjured up with our minds, without any ground or basis--we cannot trace it back to an original impression. If an idea [regarding some object in perception] is not grounded in a simple

¹¹ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*.

¹² I acknowledge the missing shade of blue argument. In this paper, I am treating “blue” as a specific shade of blue that one has previously taken in before as an impression.

¹³ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*.

¹⁴ Rosenberg, Jay F. "Identity and Substance in Hume and Kant." *Topoi* 19, no. 2 (2000): 137-45.

¹⁵ Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*. T 1.1.6.1, T 1.1.6.2.

impression, we cannot be entitled to claim that we have any evidence for the validity of that idea.¹⁶ For this reason, Hume argues that we cannot be justified whatsoever, to think that we can know of the idea of substance.¹⁷

The issue in Hume's framework of perception precisely lies in the fact that we have no entitlement or justification to the idea of substance. The idea of substance is directly related to time as well--to think of something as being the same as itself, requires that we think of it over a duration of time. In addition to arguing that the idea of substance is simply a product of imagination, Hume claims the idea that a persisting, unchanging duration of time is a fiction as well.¹⁸ Our judgment that we are able to perceive unchanging objects which endure through time, is a "fiction of the imagination" and therefore embodies a "mistake".¹⁹ Thus, in perception, we have no evidence to claim that the objects which appear to me remain the same as themselves over an extended period of time. Furthermore, the ideas of the subsisting object and the duration of time, are mutually supporting mistakes, and we are entitled to neither of these ideas.²⁰

If Hume is right, it would mean that in ordinary perception, I am not justified to think that I can pick out separate, subsisting objects from my impressions. When I take myself to perceive my surroundings, my only legitimate perceptual acts are of my immediate, single moments of impressions. It seems like, on this view, we cannot have any meaningful discussions about any specific objects, as the idea of substance is simply a "fiction". For instance, any of our discussions about the significance of some historical object or artifact would be based on some groundless fiction that our mind creates. To talk about the importance of those objects, it seems

¹⁶ Not to be confused with relations of ideas, which are entirely analytic a priori. These ideas that are derived from impressions are a synthetic a posteriori.

¹⁷ Ibid, T 1.1.6.1, T 1.1.6.2.

¹⁸ Rosenberg, Jay F. "Identity and Substance in Hume and Kant." *Topoi* 19, no. 2 (2000): 137-45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

necessary that we acknowledge its endurance over years of history. We cannot admire the historical weight of some object, if we claim that its endurance through time is simply a fiction of our minds. Also, if we want to observe how a certain object behaves in different conditions over time, we cannot be confident in doing so, if our idea of substance is fictional. Hume's treatment of substance in perception seems to throw off subjects like Archaeology, Art History, and even certain scientific experiments. He puts us in a skeptical position where we cannot take ourselves to perceive that objects retain their substance over time. Kant's framework of perception can potentially rescue us from falling into Hume's skepticism by securing our ability to judge that we can perceive objects over time.

In the A Deduction of the First *Critique*, Kant explains how we get from sensations, or what Hume calls "impressions", to perceptions of objects.²¹ Unlike Hume, Kant has a clear idea of what distinguishes sensations²² from perceptions. Then, in the 1st Analogy of Experience, Kant shows the successive nature of perception. In both parts of the *Critique*, he grounds our ability to perceive objects over time in a necessary *a priori* principle--the category of substance.

Kant diverges from Hume in how immediate sense content is given to us. In Hume's model of perception, our minds take in the objects. In other words, my given sensations are caused by the objects. On the other hand, Kant claims that there are certain *a priori* conditions which allow me to receive this manifold of sensations in the first place. Rather than adapting the properties of the objects we perceive, the objects only appear to us the way they do because they conform to our minds.²³ Thus, there are certain functions that we bring to sensations that

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A99.

²² Ibid, A100-A101, "appearances".

²³ Ibid, Bxvii. The Copernican Revolution, "we can know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them", meaning, objects conform to us.

organize them in various ways. One of the ways in which we order sensations, is that we can reproduce them in time.

In A102, Kant argues that [perception] necessarily presupposes the reproducibility of appearances.²⁴ In this argument, Kant claims the possibility of perception requires that appearances, or sensations, are reproducible.²⁵ For Kant, perception entails the following: they are necessarily of objects, and cannot be of sensations alone. This means, an act of perception would only count as one, if a perceiver could identify individual objects in their field of perception.²⁶ The difference between an act of perception and having a manifold of sensations can be illustrated as such: when seeing an elaborately painted still-life, we can individuate objects in the painting. Meaning, the objects in the painting can be identified as specific entities. On the other hand, when looking at an abstract painting, we can have the sensation of different colors and shapes, but we cannot identify 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.

For Kant, a necessary condition for perception is that our sensations are reproducible. For something to be reproducible, it must be reproduced in the progression of time. The flow of time can be thought of as a series of freeze-frames that rapidly succeed each other. These frames are always progressing in one linear direction, and do not rewind. We reproduce sensations in the same manner as the progression of the freeze-frames--so we feel as if there is a smooth continuation from the moment just before and the moment now. We reproduce our past sensations and connect them with present ones as time flows, so we do not feel like there are any

²⁴ Ibid, A102.

²⁵ Ibid, A100.

²⁶ Ibid, B218.

jarring gaps as time progresses. This is because we can reproduce sensations in time, in a linear and unidirectional manner.

Since we constantly reproduce sensations in time, it cannot be the case that we find the object of perception in those sensations alone. Thus, in reproduction, we presuppose that past sensations combine in a single object. This means, there is an *a priori* principle that holds or synthesizes our sensations over time and combines them into individual objects. This *a priori* principle is necessary for perception, and it is what Kant calls the “category of substance”. Only with this specific category, substance, are we able to organize our reproduced sensations into recognizable entities--or objects. To repeat, for Kant, perception is always of objects. Thus, perception requires that sensations are necessarily reproducible and held together over time, via this *a priori* principle--the category of substance.²⁷

After Kant has established how we get from manifolds of sensations to perceptions of objects, Kant then provides an account of how we are able to separate succession with simultaneity in perception. Kant’s argument in the First Analogy is as follows: the form of our perception is that of a single time-ordering of all empirical encounters and their objects.²⁸ In other words, since time is unidirectional and singular,²⁹ all of our perceptions are successive in time, with no exceptions, as this is the fundamental structure of our perceptual experience. Hume would argue that in perception alone, all we find is a series of successive impressions, with no justified connections between them. Each instance of our immediate impressions shifts from one to the other rapidly as time goes on. Kant agrees with Hume in that all our perceptions happen in

²⁷ Ibid, A182.

²⁸ Rosenberg, "Identity and Substance in Hume and Kant."

²⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. A189/B232.

time, and are therefore successive in nature.³⁰ Here, he also agrees with Hume that perception alone does not grant us the evidence to justify the distinction between succession and simultaneity. The issue that Kant takes with Hume, then, lies in the fact that we sometimes actually do take objects as co-existing with one another in our perceptual fields; Kant grounds our ability to make this distinction in the category of substance and not in the reflection in perception itself.³¹

Even though perception is inherently successive and the flow of time is always unidirectional and continuous, we are able to perceive multiple objects and take them to exist simultaneously.³² It is not the case that if we first look at one set of objects and then the next, the first set of objects succeed the next. Although the first set of objects comes into my perceptual field before the other, I do not think that the objects I perceive first come into existence prior to the other. Rather, the two sets of objects exist simultaneously, and it is only a matter of which set I take into my perceptual field first. If I switch the order in which I see the two sets of objects, I would still take them to exist simultaneously. Kant argues, if we examine perception alone, we will always take our perceptual experiences to be successive, and therefore will not be able to justify our idea that objects coexist with one another. Thus, there must be something else that comes *prior* to our perceptual experiences. Kant concludes that the *a priori* category of substance is ordering our perceptions; the category of substance allows us to perceive distinct objects that endure through time and retain their identities, rather than a bunch of successive series of simple impressions in time.

³⁰ Ibid, A182. "Our apprehension of the manifold of appearances is always successive and is therefore always changing."

³¹ Ibid, A182/B225.

³² Ibid, A182.

The category of substance grants us the ability to synthesize manifolds of sensations into acts of perceptions--our ability to identify objects through time.³³ Most importantly, Kant establishes that perception is only possible under the category of substance. As this category is *a priori* and necessary for all acts of perception possible, we can take our perceptual experiences to be secure and legitimate.³⁴ Compared to Hume's skeptical approach, Kant's treatment of perception allows us to secure the knowledge of substance within the realm of our perceptual world. In addition, Kant distinguishes mere sensations from acts of perceptions, which can be important for us to recognize objects and assert meaning to them. To be able to think about our perceptual experience as objective and grounded can also save us from falling into skeptical doubt about our direct experiences of the world. For these reasons, I argue that Kant's account of perception is preferable to that of Hume's.

Kant explains how we can distinguish sensations from perceptions. Hume treats both impressions and ideas to be a part of what he refers to as "perception". On this account, it seems like perceptions are simply sensations. When we take in the world through our sensory faculties such as vision, hearing, or smell, we are somehow able to organize those sensations and prescribe meaning to them. Yet, I am not justified to claim that I take myself to perceive objects, since the only thing I can be certain of, are my elementary impressions and ideas of the world around me. In other words, for Hume, it seems like we cannot take ourselves to be certain of anything that is not immediately given to us in the form of a sensation. We are guided by some sort of "useful fiction" or "custom"³⁵ when we make judgments about substance and time. On the other hand, Kant distinguishes sensations and perceptions by showing the way in which we

³³ Ibid, A103.

³⁴ Rosenberg, "Identity and Substance in Hume and Kant."

³⁵ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.: a Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh U.a.*, 10.

organize our sensations through the category of substance. As Kant's categories are necessary for perception in the first place, we can be justified to claim that we take ourselves to perceive objects. We can talk about these objects over an extended period and ascribe meaning to these objects, and the judgments we make would be legitimate--if they remain in the perceptible realm.³⁶

Kant's framework of perception also allows us to think of perception as an objectively valid means of interpreting the world around us. Hume, however, argues that we do not have evidence for claims about anything that is not directly given in an impression. Hume's framework seems to also carry significant consequences for certain types of knowledge. Consider an experiment that relies on the observations of organisms over time, or measurements which involve varying parts of an experiment in order to observe change in a single subject. The entire premise of the experiment relies on observing how one object undergoes change over time, and still retains its substance. If Hume is right, we cannot be justified to make any hypotheses about the experiment, as our idea that something is the same as itself over time is simply a fiction of the imagination. On the other hand, by employing Kant's framework of perception, we can think that these experiments are objectively grounded in our ability to perceive objects. Again, it is necessary that the category of substance is ordering our perceptual experiences, as they make perception possible in the first place. Thus, knowledge which involves perception is secured in Kant's framework.

In this paper, I argued that Kant's notion of perception is preferable to Hume's. Phenomenologically, perception seems to be one of the most immediate and direct ways for us to contact the world. Securing our knowledge of concepts such as substance allows us to take our

³⁶ Kant says that we cannot know of things-in-themselves. Here I am referring to appearances and what can possibly come into our perceptual fields.

perceptual acts to be objectively grounded. Further, securing the validity of the concepts such as substance is only the start of Kant's overall project of securing immanent metaphysical knowledge. As we can secure our knowledge of substance, we can talk about alteration and causation as well. It is important that we can take Kant's account to be preferable to that of Hume's, as we can be rescued from any skepticism and doubt regarding our first-person perceptual experiences of the world around us.

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